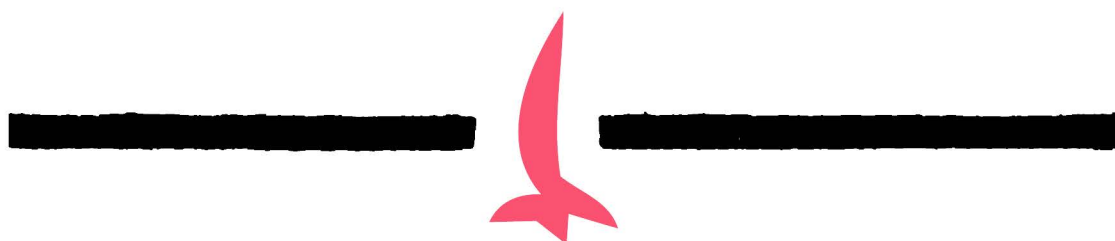


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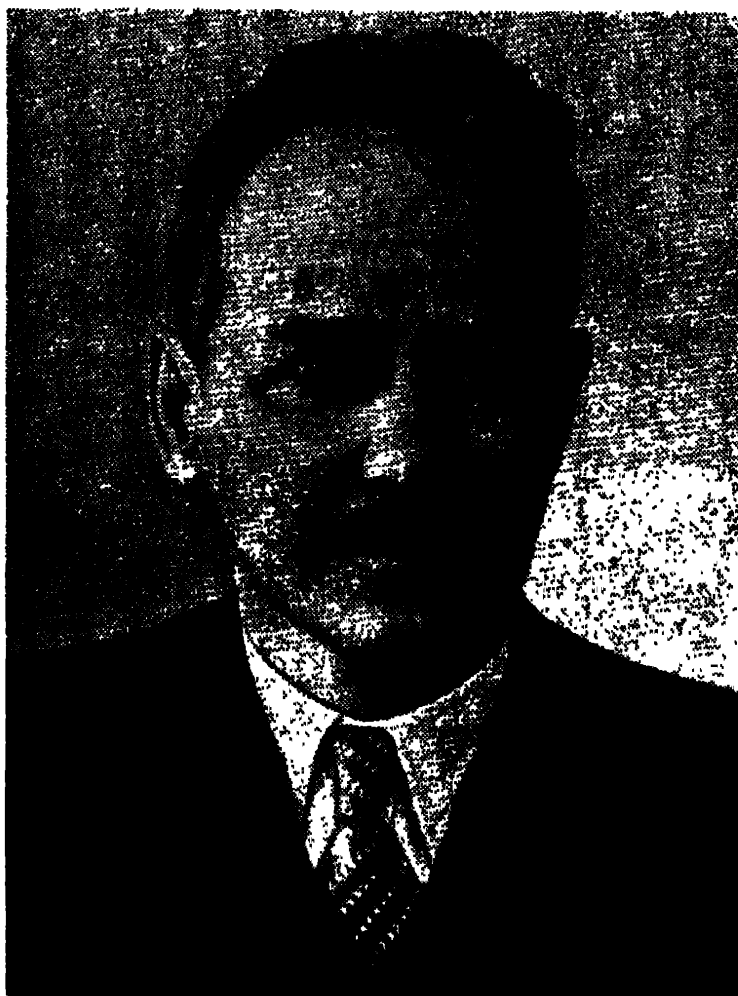
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**ДВАДЦАТЬ ПЯТЬ РАССКАЗОВ
ПИСАТЕЛЕЙ РЕСПУБЛИК
СОВЕТСКОГО СОЮЗА**

DESIGNED BY D M I T R Y B I S T I

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MIKHAIL SHOLOKHOV

Russian Author

Mikhail Alexandrovich Sholokhov (b. 1900), author of *And Quiet Flows the Don*, *Virgin Soil Uplifted* and *The Fate of a Man*, is one of the greatest writers of the day, read and known all over the world.

His home in a quiet village called Veshenskaya, which is hard to find on the map, is known to everyone in the Soviet Union. For Sholokhov is a chosen deputy of the people, a true friend to all, and his advice is sought by old and young alike: be it a young man who wants his mind made up for him in his choice of career, or a lonely old woman worrying about her only granddaughter's engagement, or a farmer who wants to talk over his troubles.

People come to see Sholokhov at any hour of the day and night and never do they go away empty-handed. A great number of young writers prefer to send their manuscripts to Sholokhov rather than directly to the publishing houses; for Sholokhov can always be depended upon to give the beginners a helping hand.

At present Sholokhov is working on the second part of *Virgin Soil Uplifted* and his novel *They Fought for Their Country*.

THE FATE OF A MAN

There was a rare drive and swiftness in the first spring that came to the upper reaches of the Don in the first year after the war. At the end of March, warm winds blew from the shores of the Azov Sea and in two days the sands on the left bank of the river were bare, the snow-choked gullies and ravines swelled in the steppe, the streams burst the ice and flooded madly and the roads became almost completely impassable.

At this unfavourable time of the year it so happened that I had to make a journey to the district centre of Bukanovskaya. The distance was not great—only about sixty kilometres—but it turned out to be hard going. My friend and I set out before sunrise. The pair of well-fed horses strained at the traces and could scarcely pull the heavy wagon. The wheels sank axle-deep into the damp mush of sand mixed with snow and ice and in an hour creamy white flecks of foam appeared on the horses' flanks and under the narrow straps of the breech bands, and the fresh morning air was filled with the sharp intoxicating smell of horses' sweat and warm harness lavishly smeared with tar.

Where the going was particularly heavy for the horses we got out and walked. The slushy snow squelched under our boots and it was hard to get along, but the roadside was still coated with a glittering crust of ice,

and there it was even harder. It took us about six hours to do the thirty kilometres as far as the ford over the River Yelanka.

The little river at Mokhovskoi village, almost dry in summer, had now flooded over a full kilometre of marshy alder-grown water meadows. We had to make the crossing in a leaky flat-bottomed boat that could not take more than three people at the most. We sent the horses back. In a collective-farm shed on the other side an old and battered jeep that had been standing there all the winter was awaiting us. The driver and I with some misgivings climbed into the unsteady little craft. My friend stayed behind on the bank with our things. We had scarcely pushed off when little fountains of water came spouting up through the rotten planks. We plugged them with anything we could lay hands on and kept bailing until we reached the other side. In an hour we were on the far bank of the river. The driver fetched the jeep from the village and went back to the boat.

"If this perishing old tub doesn't fall to bits in the water," he said, picking up an oar, "I'll be back with your friend in a couple of hours. At the earliest."

The village lay a good distance from the river, and down by the water there was that kind of stillness that falls on deserted places only in the depths of autumn or at the very beginning of spring. The water gave off a damp smell mingled with the tart bitterness of rotting alders, and from the distant steppes bathing in a lilac haze of mist a light breeze brought the eternally young, barely perceptible aroma of earth that has not long been liberated from the snow.

Not far away, on the sand at the water's edge, lay a broken wattle fence. I sat down on it to have a smoke but, on putting my hand in my jacket pocket, discovered to my great disappointment that the packet of cigarettes I had been carrying there was soaked. On the way

across a wave had slapped over the side of the wallowing boat and drenched me to the waist in muddy water. There had been no time to think of my cigarettes, for I had to drop my oar and start bailing as fast as I could to save us from sinking, but now, vexed at my own carelessness, I drew the sodden packet gingerly out of my pocket, got down on my haunches and began laying out the moist brownish cigarettes one by one on the fence.

It was noon. The sun shone as hot as in May. I hoped the cigarettes would soon dry. It was so hot that I began to regret having put on my quilted army trousers and jacket for the journey. It was the first really warm day of the year. But it was good to sit there alone, abandoning myself completely to the stillness and solitude, and, taking off my old army *ushanka*, to let the breeze dry my hair after the heavy work of rowing, and to stare up vacantly at the big-breasted clouds floating in the faded blue.

Presently I noticed a man come out on the road from behind the end cottages of the village. He was leading a little boy, about five or six years old, I reckoned, not more. They tramped wearily towards the ford, but, on reaching the jeep, turned and came in my direction. The man, tall and rather stooped, came right up to me and said in a deep husky voice:

"Hullo, mate."

"Hullo." I shook the big rough hand he offered me.

The man bent down to the little boy and said: "Say hullo to Uncle, lad. Looks as if he's another driver like your dad. Only you and I used to drive a lorry, didn't we, and he goes about in that little bus over there."

Looking straight at me with a pair of eyes that were as bright and clear as the sky, and smiling a little, the boy boldly held out a pink cold hand. I shook it gently and asked: "Feeling chilly, old man? Why's your hand so cold on a hot day like this?"

With a touching childish trustfulness the boy pressed against my knees and lifted his little flaxen eyebrows in surprise.

"But I'm not an old man, Uncle. I'm only a boy, and I'm not chilly either. My hands are just cold because I've been making snowballs."

Taking the half-empty rucksack off his back, the father sat down heavily beside me and said: "This passenger of mine is a regular young nuisance, he is. He's made me tired as well as himself. If you take a long stride he breaks into a trot; just you try keeping in step with a footslogger like him. Where I could take one pace, I have to take three instead, and so we go on, like a horse and a tortoise. And you need eyes in the back of your head to know what he's doing. As soon as you turn your back, he's off paddling in a puddle or breaking off an icicle and sucking it like a lollipop. No, it's no job for a man to be travelling with someone like him, not on foot anyway." He was silent for a little, then asked: "And what about you, mate, waiting for your chief?"

By now I didn't want to tell him I was not a driver, so I answered:

"Looks as if I'll have to."

"Is he coming over from the other side?"

"He will be."

"Do you know if the boat will be here soon?"

"In about two hours' time."

"That's a fair stretch. Well, let's have a rest, I'm in no hurry. Just saw you as I was walking past, so I thought to myself there's one of us, drivers, taking a spot of sunshine. I'll go over and have a smoke with him, I thought. No fun in smoking alone, any more than in dying alone. You live well, I see, smoking cigarettes. Got them wet, eh? Well, brother, wet tobacco's like a doctored horse, neither of them any good. Let's have a go at my old shag instead."

He pulled a worn silk pouch out of the pocket of his thin khaki trousers, and as he unrolled it, I noticed the words embroidered on the corner: "To one of our dear soldiers from a pupil of Lebedyanskaya Secondary School."

We smoked the strong home-grown tobacco and for a long time neither of us spoke. I was going to ask him where he was making for with the boy, and what brought him out on such bad roads, but he got his question in first:

"At it all through the war, were you?"

"Nearly all of it."

"Front line?"

"Yes."

"Well, I had a good bellyful of trouble out there too, mate, more than enough of it."

He rested his big dark hands on his knees and let his shoulders droop. When I glanced at him sideways I felt strangely disturbed. Have you ever seen eyes that look as if they've been sprinkled with ash, eyes filled with such ingrained yearning and sadness that it is hard to look into them? This chance acquaintance of mine had eyes like that.

He broke a dry twisted twig out of the fence and for a minute traced a curious pattern in the sand with it, then he spoke:

"Sometimes I can't sleep at night, I just stare into the darkness and I think: 'What did you do it for, life, why did you maim me like this? Why did you tear the guts out of me?' And I get no answer, either in darkness, or when the sun's shining bright.... No, I get no answer, and I'll never get one!" And suddenly he recollected himself, nudged his little son affectionately and said: "Go on, laddie, go and play down by the water, there's always something for little boys to do by a big river. Only mind you don't get your feet wet."

While we had been smoking together in silence, I had taken a quick look at father and son and one thing about them had struck me as unusual. The boy was dressed plainly but in good stout clothes. The way the long-skirted little coat with its soft lining of worn beaver lamb fitted him, the way his tiny boots had been made to fit snugly over the woollen socks, the very neat darn that joined an old tear on the sleeve of the coat, all these things spoke of a woman's hand, the skilful hand of a mother. But the father's appearance was different. His quilted jacket was scorched in several places and roughly darned, the patch on his worn khaki trousers was not sewn on properly, it was tacked on with big mannish stitches; he was wearing an almost new pair of army shoes, but his thick woollen socks were full of holes. They had never known the touch of a woman's hand. . . . Even then I had thought, either he's a widower, or there's something wrong between him and his wife.

He watched his son run down to the water, then coughed and again began to speak, and I listened with all my attention.

"To start with, my life was just ordinary. I'm from the Voronezh Province, born there in 1900. During the Civil War I was in the Red Army, in Kikvidze's division. In the famine of 'twenty-two I struck out for the Kuban and worked like an ox for the kulaks, wouldn't be alive today if I hadn't. But my whole family back home, father, mother and sister, died of starvation. So I was left alone. As for relatives anywhere, I hadn't got a single one, not a soul. Well, after a year I came back from the Kuban, sold my cottage and went to Voronezh. First I worked as a carpenter, then I went to a factory and learned to be a mechanic. And soon I got married. My wife had been brought up in a children's home. She was an orphan. Yes, I got a good one there! Good-tempered, cheerful, always anxious to please. And smart she was, too,

no comparison with me. She had known what real trouble was since she was a kid, mebbe that had an effect on her character. Just looking at her from the side, as you might say, she wasn't all that striking, but, you see, I wasn't looking at her from the side, I was looking at her full face. And for me there was no more beautiful woman in the whole world, and there never will be.

"I'd come home from work tired, and bad-tempered as hell sometimes. But no, she'd never fling your rudeness back at you. She'd be so gentle and quiet, couldn't do enough for you, always trying to get you a bit of something nice, even when there wasn't enough to go round. It made your heart lighter just to look at her, and after a while you'd put your arm round her and say: 'I'm sorry I was rude to you, Irina dear, I had a rotten day at work today.' And again there'd be peace between us, and my mind would be at rest. And you know what that means to your work, mate? In the morning I'd be out of bed like a shot and off to the factory, and any job I laid hands on would go like clockwork. That's what it means to have a real clever friend for a wife.

"Sometimes it'd happen that I'd have a drink with the boys on pay-day. And sometimes, the scissor-legged way I staggered home afterwards, it must have been frightening to watch. The main street wasn't wide enough for me, let alone the side streets. In those days I was a tough strong young fellow and I could hold a lot of drink, and I always got home on my own. But sometimes the last stretch would be in bottom gear, you know, I'd finish up by crawling on my hands and knees. But again I'd never get a word of reproach, no scolding, no shouting. My Irina, she'd just laugh at me, and she did that careful like, so that even drunk as I was I wouldn't take it wrong. She'd pull my boots off and whisper: 'You'd better lie next to the wall tonight, Andrei, or you might fall out of bed in your sleep.' And I'd

just flop down like a sack of oats and everything would go swimming round in front of me. And as I dropped off to sleep, I'd feel her stroking my head softly and whispering kind words, and I knew she felt sorry for me....

"In the morning she'd get me up about two hours before work to give me time to come round. She knew I wouldn't eat anything after being drunk, so she'd get me a pickled cucumber or something like that, and pour me out a good glass of vodka to take off the after-effects. 'Here you are, Andrei, but don't do it any more, dear.' How could a man let someone down who put such trust in him? I'd drink it up, thank her without words, just with a look and a kiss, and go off to work like a lamb. But if she'd had a word to say against me when I was drunk, if she'd started cursing or scolding me, I'd have come home drunk again, God's truth I would. That's what happens in some families where the wife's a fool. I've seen plenty of it and I know.

"Well, soon the children started arriving. First my little son was born, then two girls. And that was when I broke away from my mates. I started taking all my pay home to the wife; we had a fair-sized family now, and there was no time for drinking. On my day off I'd have just a glass of beer and let it go at that.

"In twenty-nine I got interested in motors, I learned to drive and started to work on a lorry. And when I got into the way of it I didn't want to go back to the factory any more. I found it more to my liking at the wheel. And so I lived for ten years without noticing how the time went by. It was like a dream. But what's ten years? Ask any man over forty if he's noticed how he's spent his life. You'll find he hasn't noticed a darned thing! The past is like that distant steppe way out there in the haze. This morning I was crossing it and it was clear all round, but now I've covered twenty kilometres there's a haze over it,

and you can't tell the trees from the grass, nor the ploughland from the meadow.

"Those ten years I worked day and night. I earned good money and we lived no worse than other folk. And the children were a joy to us. All three did well at school, and the eldest, Anatoly, turned out to be so bright at mathematics that he even got his name in a Moscow newspaper. Where he inherited this great gift from, I couldn't tell you, mate. But it was a very nice thing for me, and I was proud of him, mighty proud I was!

"In ten years we saved up a bit of money and before the war we built ourselves a little cottage with two rooms and a shed and a little porch. Irina bought a couple of goats. What more did we want? There was milk for the children's porridge, we had a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs, shoes on our feet, so everything was all right. The only thing was I didn't choose a very good place to build. They allotted me a plot of land not far from an aircraft factory. Mebbe, if my little place had been somewhere else, my life would have turned out different. . . .

"And then it came—war. The next day I had my call-up papers, and the day after it was, 'report to the station, please.' All my four saw me off together: Irina, Anatoly, and my daughters, Nastenka and Olyushka. The kids took it fine, though the girls couldn't keep back a tear or two. Anatoly just shivered a bit as if he was cold, he was getting on for seventeen by that time. But that Irina of mine. . . . I'd never seen anything like it in all the seventeen years we'd lived together. That night my shirt and chest were wet with her tears, and in the morning it was the same tale. We got to the station and I felt so sorry for her I couldn't look her in the face. Her lips were all swollen with tears, her hair was poking out from under her shawl, and her eyes were dull and staring like someone who's out of his mind. The officers

gave the order to get aboard but she flung herself on my chest, and clasped her hands round my neck, and she was shaking all over, like a tree that's being chopped down.... The children tried to talk her round, and so did I, but nothing would help. Other women chatted to their husbands and sons, but mine clung to me like a leaf to a branch, and just trembled all the time, and couldn't say a word. 'Take a grip of yourself, Irina dear,' I said. 'Say something to me before I go, at least.' And this is what she said, with a sob between every word: 'Andrei... my darling... we'll never... never see each other again... in this world....'

"There was I with my heart bursting with pity for her, and she says a thing like that to me. She ought to have understood it wasn't easy for me to part with her, I wasn't going off to a party either. And that got my rag out! I pulled her hands apart and gave her a push. It seemed only a gentle push to me, but I was strong as an ox and she staggered back about three paces, then came towards me again with little steps, and I shouted at her: 'Is that the way to say good-bye? Do you want to bury me before my time?!' But then I took her in my arms again because I could see she was in a bad way...."

He broke off suddenly and in the silence that followed I heard a choking sound coming from his throat. His emotion communicated itself to me. I glanced sideways at him but did not see a single tear in those dead ashy eyes of his. He sat with his head drooping dejectedly. The big hands hanging limply at his sides were shaking slightly; his chin trembled, and so did his firm lips.

"Don't let it get you down, friend, don't think of it," I said quietly, but he seemed not to hear my words, and overcoming his emotion with a great effort, said suddenly in a hoarse, strangely altered voice:

"Till my last, dying day, till the last hour of my life I'll never forgive myself for pushing her away like that!"

He fell silent again and for a long time. He tried to roll a cigarette, but the strip of newspaper tore apart in his fingers and the tobacco scattered on to his knees. In the end he managed to make a clumsy roll of paper and tobacco, took a few hungry pulls at it, then, clearing his throat, went on:

"I tore myself away from Irina, took her face in my hands, and kissed her, and her lips were like ice. I said good-bye to the kids and ran to the carriage, managed to jump on the steps as it was moving. The train started off very slow, and it took me past my family again. I could see my poor little orphaned kids bunched up together, waving their hands and trying to smile, but not managing it. And Irina had her hands clasped to her breast, her lips as white as chalk, and she was whispering something, and staring, and her body was all bent forward as if she was trying to walk against a strong wind. And that's how I'll see her in my memory for the rest of my life—her hands clasped to her breast, those white lips, and her eyes wide open and full of tears.... And that's mostly how I see her in my dreams too. Why did I push her away like that? Even now, when I remember, it's like a blunt knife twisting in my heart.

"We were drafted to our units at Belaya Tserkov, in the Ukraine. I was given a three-tonner, and that's what I went to the front in. Well, there's no point in telling you about the war, you saw it yourself and you know what it was like to start with. You'd get a lot of letters from home, but didn't write much yourself. Just now and then you'd write that everything was all right and you were doing a bit of fighting. Mebbe we're retreating at present, you'd say, but it won't be long before we gather our strength and give the Fritzies something to think about. And what else could you write? Those were grim times and you didn't feel like writing. And I must say I was never much of a one for harping on a

pitiful note, and I couldn't stick the sight of those slobbering types that wrote to their wives and kids every day for no reason at all, just to rub their snot over the paper—oh, it's such a hard life, oh, I might get killed! And so he goes on, the son-of-a-bitch, complaining and looking for sympathy, blubbering away, and he can't understand that those poor unhappy women and kids are having just as bad a time of it back home as we are. Why, they were carrying the whole country on their shoulders. And what shoulders our women and children must have had not to be crushed down under a weight like that! But they weren't crushed, they stuck it out! And then one of those whimperers writes his pitiful letter and that just knocks a working woman off her feet. After a letter like that, the poor thing won't know what to do with herself or how to face up to her work. No! That's what a man's for, that's what you're a soldier for—to put up with everything, to bear everything, if need be. But if you've got more woman than man in you, then go and put on a frilled skirt to puff out your skinny arse, so you can look like a woman at least from behind, and go and weed the beet, or milk the cows, because your kind aren't needed at the front, the stink's bad enough there without you!

"But I didn't get even a year's fighting done.... I was wounded twice, but only slightly both times, once in the arm, the second time in the leg. The first was a bullet from an aircraft, the second a chunk of shrapnel. The Germans holed my lorry, top and sides, but I was lucky, mate, at first. I was lucky all the time, and then I was unlucky.... I got taken prisoner at Lozovenki in the May of forty-two. It was an awkward set-up. The Germans were attacking hard and one of our 120 mm. howitzer batteries had nearly run out of ammo; we loaded up my lorry chock-full of shells, I worked on the job myself till my shirt was sticking to my back. We had to get a move

on because they were closing in on us; on the left we could hear a rumble of tanks, and firing on the right and in front, and things didn't smell too healthy.

" 'Can you get through, Sokolov?' asks the commander of our company. He need never have asked. Was I going to sit twiddling my thumbs while my mates got killed? 'What are you talking about!' I told him. 'I've got to get through, and that's that.' 'Get cracking then,' he says, 'and step on it.'

"And step on it I did. Never driven like that before in my life! I knew I wasn't carrying a load of spuds, I knew I had to be careful with the stuff I'd got aboard, but how could I be, when the lads were fighting out there empty-handed, when the whole road was under artillery fire. I did about six kilometres and got pretty near the place. I'd have to turn off the road to get to the hollow where the battery was stationed, and then what did I see? Strike me, if it wasn't our infantry running back across the field on both sides of the road with shells bursting all round them. What was I to do? I couldn't turn back, could I? So I gave her all she'd got. There was only about a kilometre to go to the battery, I had already turned off the road, but I never reached it, mate.... Must have been a long-range gun landed a heavy one near the lorry. I never heard the bang nor anything, just something burst inside my head, and I don't remember any more. How I stayed alive, and how long I lay there by the ditch, I've got no idea. I opened my eyes, but I couldn't get up; my head kept jerking and I was shaking as if I had a fever, everything seemed dark, something was scraping and grinding in my left shoulder, and my body ached all over as if somebody had been lamming into me for two days running with anything he could lay hands on. I squirmed about on my belly for a long time, and in the end I managed to get up. But still I couldn't reckon out where I was, nor

what had happened to me. My memory was clean gone. But I was scared to lie down. I was scared I'd never get up again, so I just stood there swaying from side to side like a poplar in a gale.

"When I came to myself and had a look round, my heart felt as if someone had got a pair of pliers round it. The shells I'd been carrying were lying about all round me, not far away was my lorry, all torn to bits, with its wheels in the air, and the fighting, the fighting was going on behind me.... Yes, behind me!

"When I realized that, and I'm not ashamed to say it, my legs just caved in under me and I fell as if I'd been pole-axed, because I realized I was cut off behind the enemy lines, or to put it point-blank, I was already a prisoner of the fascists. That's war for you....

"No, it's not an easy thing to understand, mate, it's not easy to understand that you've got taken prisoner through no wish of your own. And it takes time to explain to a fellow who's never felt it on his own hide, just what that thing means.

"So I lay there and soon I heard the tanks rumbling. Four medium German tanks went by me at full speed in the direction I'd brought the shells from. What do you think that felt like? Then came the tractors hauling the guns, and a mobile kitchen, then the infantry, not many of 'em, not more than a company all told. I'd squint up at them out of the corner of my eye and then I'd press my face into the earth again; it made me sick to look at them, sick in my soul....

"When I thought they'd all gone past, I lifted my head, and there were six submachine-gunners marching along about a hundred paces away. And as I looked they turned off the road and came straight towards me, all six of 'em, without saying a word. Well, I thought, this is it. So I got into a sitting position—I didn't want to die lying down—and then I stood up. One of them

stopped a few paces away from me and jerked his gun off his shoulder. And it's funny how a man's made, but at that moment I didn't feel any panic, not even a shiver in my heart. I just looked at him and thought: 'It's going to be a short burst, I wonder where he'll place it? At my head or across my chest?' As if it mattered a damn to me what part of my body he made his holes in.

"Young fellow he was, pretty well built, dark-haired, but his lips were thin as thread, and his eyes had a nasty glint in them. That one won't think twice about shooting me down, I thought. And sure enough, up goes his gun. I looked him straight in the eye and didn't say anything. But another one, a corporal or something, older than him, almost elderly to look at, shouted something, then pushed the other fellow aside and came up to me. He babbled something in his own language and bent my right elbow, feeling my muscle he was. 'O-o-oh!' he says when he feels it, and pointed along the road to where the sun was setting, as much as to say: 'Off you go, you mule, and work for our Reich.' Thrifty type he was, the son-of-a-bitch!

"But the dark-haired one had got his eye on my boots and they looked a good sound pair, so he signs with his hand: 'Take 'em off!' I sat down on the ground, took off my boots and handed them to him. Fair snatched them out of my hands he did. So I unwound my footcloths and held them out to him, looking up at him from the ground. But he shouted and swore, and up went his gun again. And the others just roared with laughter. And so they went away. Only the dark-haired one, he looked round at me about three times before he got to the road, and his eyes glittered like a wolf-cub's with fury. Anyone would think I'd taken his boots instead of him taking mine.

"Well, mate, there was nothing for it. I went on to the road, let out the longest and hottest Voronezh cuss I

could think of, and stepped out westward—a prisoner! But I wasn't much good for walking by that time, a kilometre an hour was all I could do, not more. It was like being drunk. You'd try to go straight and something would just push you from one side of the road to the other. I went on for a bit and then a column of our prisoners from the same division as I'd been in caught up with me. There were about ten German submachine-gunners guarding them. The one at the front of the column came up to me and, without saying a word, just bashed me on the head with his gun. If I'd gone down, he'd have stitched me to the ground with a burst, but our chaps caught me as I fell and hustled me into the middle of the column and half carried me along for a while. And when I came to, one of them whispered: 'Don't fall down for God's sake! Keep going while you've got any strength left, or they'll kill you!' And though I had mighty little strength left, I managed to keep going.

"As soon as the sun went down the Germans strengthened their guard, brought up another twenty submachine-gunners in a lorry, and drove us on at a quicker pace. The badly wounded ones couldn't keep up with the rest, and they shot them down in the road. Two tried to make a break for it, but they forgot that on a moonlit night you can be seen a mile away out in the open; of course, they got shot too. At midnight we came to a village that was half burned down. They drove us into a church with a smashed dome. We spent the night on the stone floor without a scrap of straw, and no one had a greatcoat, we were all in our tunics, so there wasn't anything to lie on. Some of us didn't even have tunics, just calico undershirts. They were mostly NCOs. They had taken off their tunics so they couldn't be told from the rank and file. And the men from the gun crews hadn't got tunics either. They had been taken prisoner half-naked as they were while working at the guns.

"That night it poured with rain and we all got wet to the skin. Part of the roof had been smashed by a heavy shell or a bomb and the rest of it was ripped up by shrapnel; there wasn't a dry spot even at the altar. And so we spent the whole night in that church, like sheep in a dark pen. In the middle of the night I felt someone touch my arm and ask: 'Are you wounded, comrade?' 'Why do you ask, mate?' I says. 'I'm a doctor, perhaps I can help you in some way.' I told him my left shoulder made a creaking noise and was swollen and gave me terrible pain. And he says firmly: 'Take off your tunic and undershirt.' I took everything off and he started feeling about with his thin fingers round my shoulder, and did it hurt! I ground my teeth and I says to him: 'You must be a vet, not a doctor. Why do you press just where it hurts, you heartless devil?' But he kept on groping about, and he says to me, angry like: 'Your job's to keep your mouth shut! Talking to me like that! Just wait, it'll hurt more in a minute.' And then he gave my arm such a wrench that red sparks spurted out of my eyes.

"When I got my senses back I asked him: 'What are you doing, you fascist bastard. My arm's broken to bits and you give it a pull like that.' I heard him chuckle, then he said: 'I thought you'd hit out with your right while I was doing it, but you're a good-tempered chap, it seems. Your arm wasn't broken, it was out of joint and I've put it back in its socket. Well, feeling any better?' And sure enough, I could feel the pain going out of me. I thanked him from the bottom of my heart and he went on in the darkness, asking quietly: 'Any wounded?' There was a real doctor for you. Even shut up like that, in pitch darkness, he went on doing his great work.

"It was a restless night. They wouldn't let us out even to relieve ourselves, the senior guard had told us that when he drove us into the church in pairs. And as luck

would have it, one of the Christians among us wanted to go out bad. He kept on saving it up and at last he burst into tears. 'I can't pollute a holy place!' he says. 'I'm a believer, I'm a Christian. What shall I do, lads?' And you know the kind of chaps we were. Some laughed, others cursed, and others started teasing him with all sorts of advice. Cheered us all up, he did, but it turned out bad in the end. He started bashing on the door and asking to be let out. And he got his answer. A fascist gave a long burst through the door with his submachine-gun, killed the Christian and three more with him, and another was so badly wounded he died by morning.

"We pulled the dead into a corner, then sat down quiet and thought to ourselves, this isn't a very cheerful start. And presently we started whispering to each other, asking each other where we came from and how we'd got taken prisoner. The chaps who'd been in the same platoon or the same company started calling quietly to each other in the darkness. And next to me I heard two voices talking. One of them says: "Tomorrow, if they form us up before they take us on farther and call out for the commissars, Communists, and Jews, you needn't try and hide yourself, platoon commander. You won't get away with it. You think just because you've taken off your tunic you'll pass for a ranker? Well, that won't wash! I'm not going to suffer because of you. I'll be the first to point you out. I know you're a Communist. I remember how you tried to get me to join the Party, now you're going to answer for it.' That was the one sitting nearest to me, on the left, and on the other side of him, a young voice answers: 'I always suspected you were a rotten type, Kryzhnev. Specially when you refused to join the Party, pretending you were illiterate. But I never thought you'd turn out to be a traitor. You went to school until you were fourteen, didn't you?' And the other one answers in a lazy sort of way: 'Yes, I did. So what?'

They were quiet for a long time, and the platoon commander—I could tell him by his voice—says softly: ‘Don’t give me away, Comrade Kryzhnev.’ And the other one laughed quietly. ‘You’ve left your comrades behind on the other side of the line,’ he says, ‘I’m no comrade of yours, so don’t plead with me, I’m going to point you out all the same. I believe in looking after my own skin first.’

“They stopped talking and my whole body shuddered at the thought of such a creeping low-down action. ‘No,’ I thought, ‘I won’t let you betray your commander, you son-of-a-bitch. You won’t walk out of this church on your own two feet, they’ll drag you out by the legs!’ Then it began to get light and I could see a fellow with a big fleshy face lying on his back with his hands behind his head, and beside him a little snub-nosed lad, in only an undershirt, sitting with his arms round his knees and looking very pale. ‘That kid won’t be able to handle this great fat gelding,’ I thought. ‘I’ll have to finish him off myself.’

“I touched the lad’s arm and asked him in a whisper: ‘You a platoon commander?’ He didn’t say anything, just nodded. ‘That one over there wants to give you away?’ I pointed to the fellow lying on his back. He nodded again. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘hold his legs so he won’t kick! And quick about it!’ And I jumped on that fellow and locked my fingers round his throat. He didn’t even have time to shout. I held him under me for a few minutes, then eased off a bit. That was one traitor less, with his tongue hanging out!

“It was a rotten feeling I had after that, and I wanted to wash my hands something terrible, as if it wasn’t a man I’d killed but some crawling snake. . . . The first time I had killed anyone in my life, and one of our own. Our own? But he wasn’t anything of the kind. He was worse than one of the enemy, he was a traitor. I got up and said to the platoon commander: ‘Let’s go away from here, comrade, the church is a big place.’

"Just as that Kryzhnev had said, in the morning we were all formed up outside the church with a ring of submachine-gunners covering us, and three SS officers started picking out the ones among us they thought were dangerous. They asked who were Communists, who were officers, who were commissars, but they didn't find any. And they didn't find anybody who was swine enough to give them away either, because nearly half of us were Communists, and there were a lot of officers, too, and commissars. They only took four out of over two hundred men. One Jew and three Russians from the rank and file. The Russians landed in trouble because they were all dark and had curly hair. The SS men just came up to them and said, '*Jude?*' The one they asked would say he was a Russian, but they wouldn't even listen. 'Step out!' and that was that.

"They shot the poor devils and drove us on further. The platoon commander who'd helped me strangle that traitor kept by me right as far as Poznan, and the first day of the march he'd edge up to me every now and then and press my hand as we went along. At Poznan we got separated. It happened like this.

"You see, mate, ever since the day I was captured I'd been thinking of escaping. But I wanted to make sure of it. All the way to Poznan, where they put us in a proper camp, I never got the right kind of chance. But in the Poznan camp it looked as if I'd got what I wanted. At the end of May they sent us out to a little wood near the camp to dig graves for the prisoners that had died, a lot of our chaps died at that time from dysentery, and while I was digging away at that Poznan clay I had a look round and I noticed that two of our guards had sat down to have a bite, and the third one was dozing in the sun. I put down my shovel and went off quietly behind a bush. And then I ran for it, keeping straight towards the sunrise.

"They couldn't have noticed me very quick, those guards. Where I found the strength, skinny as I was, to cover nearly forty kilometres in one day, I don't know myself. But nothing came of it. On the fourth day, when I was a long way from that cursed camp, they caught me. There were bloodhounds on my track, and they found me in a field of unreaped oats.

"At dawn I came to an open field and I was afraid to go across it in the daylight and it was at least three kilometres to the woods, so I lay low in the oats for the day. I crushed up some oat grains in my hand and was filling my pockets with a supply, when I heard the sound of dogs barking and the roar of a motor-cycle. My heart missed a beat because the dogs kept coming nearer. I lay flat and covered my head with my arms, so they wouldn't bite my face. Well, they came up and it only took them a minute to tear all my rags off me. I was left in nothing but what I was born in. They dragged me about in the oats, just did what they liked with me, and in the end a big dog got his forepaws on my chest and started making passes at my throat, but he didn't bite straightaway.

"Two Germans came up on motor-cycles. First they beat me up good and proper, then they set the dogs on me, and the flesh just came off me in chunks. They took me back to camp, naked and bloody as I was. I got a month in solitary for trying to escape, but I was still alive. . . . I managed to keep alive somehow!

"It's pretty awful, mate, to remember the things I went through as a prisoner, let alone tell you about them. When you remember the inhuman tortures we had to suffer out there, in Germany, when you remember all your mates who were tortured to death in those camps, your heart comes up and starts beating in your throat and it's hard to breathe.

"The way they herded us about in those two years I was a prisoner! I reckon I covered half of Germany being

driven from camp to camp. I was in Saxony, at a silicate plant, in the Ruhr, hauling coal in a mine. I sweated away with a shovel in Bavaria, I had a spell in Thüringen, and the devil knows what German soil I didn't have to tread. There's plenty of different scenery out there, but the way they shot and bashed our lads was the same all over. And those God-damned reptiles and parasites lammed into us like no man here ever beat an animal. Punching us, kicking us, beating us with rubber truncheons, with any lump of iron they happened to have handy, not to mention their rifle butts and sticks.

"They beat you up just because you were a Russian, because you were still alive in the world, just because you worked for them. And they'd beat you for giving them a wrong look, taking a wrong step, for not turning round the way they wanted.... They beat you just so that one day they'd knock the life out of you, so you'd choke with your own blood and die of beating. There weren't enough ovens in the whole of Germany, I reckon, for all of us to be shoved into.

"And everywhere we went they fed us the same: hundred and fifty grams of ersatz bread made half of sawdust, and a thin swill of swedes. Some places they gave us hot water to drink, some places they didn't. But what's the use of talking, judge for yourself. Before the war started I weighed eighty-six kilograms, and by the autumn I couldn't turn more than fifty. Just skin and bones, and hardly enough strength to carry the bones either. But you had to work, and not say a word, and the work we did would have been a lot too much for a cart-horse sometimes, I reckon.

"At the beginning of September they sent a hundred and forty-two of us Soviet prisoners-of-war from a camp near Küstrin to camp B-14, not far from Dresden. At that time there were about two thousand in that camp. We were all working in a stone quarry, cutting and crushing

their German stone by hand. The stint was four cubic metres a day per man, and for a man, mind you, who could hardly keep body and soul together anyway. And then it really started. After two months, out of the hundred and forty-two men in our group there were only fifty-seven left. How about that, mate? Tough going, eh? We hardly had time to bury our own mates, and then there was a rumour in the camp that the Germans had taken Stalingrad and were pressing on into Siberia. It was one grief after another, and they held us down so we couldn't lift our eyes from the ground, as if we were just asking to be put there, into that German earth. And every day the camp guard were drinking and bawling out their songs, rejoicing for all they were worth.

"One evening we came back to our hut from work. It had been raining all day and our rags were soaking; we were all shivering from the cold wind and couldn't stop our teeth chattering. There wasn't anywhere to get dry or warm, and we were as hungry as death itself, or even worse. But we were never given any food in the evenings.

"Well, I took off my wet rags, threw them on to my bunk and said: 'They want you to do four cubic metres a day, but one cubic metre would be plenty to bury one of us.' That was all I said, but, would you believe it, among our own fellows there was one dirty dog who went and reported my bitter words to the camp commandant.

"The camp commandant, or *Lagerführer*, as they call him, was a German called Müller. Not very tall, thick-set, hair like a bunch of tow; sort of bleached all over. The hair on his head, his eyelashes, even his eyes were a kind of faded colour, and he was pop-eyed too. Spoke Russian like you and me, even had a bit of a Volga accent, as if he'd been born and bred in those parts. And could he swear! He was a terror for it. I sometimes won-

der where the bastard ever learned that trade. He'd form us up in front of the block—that's what they called the hut—and walk down the line surrounded by his bunch of SS men with his right hand held back. He wore a leather glove and under the leather there was a strip of lead to protect his fingers. He'd walk down the line and bloody every other man's nose for him. 'Inoculation against flu,' he used to call it. And so it went on every day. Altogether there were four blocks in the camp, and one day he'd give the first block their 'inoculation,' next day, the second, and so on. Regular bastard he was, never took a day off. There was only one thing he didn't understand, the fool; before he started on his round, he'd stand out in front there, and to get himself real worked up for it, he'd start cursing. He'd stand there cursing away for all he was worth, and, do you know, he'd make us feel a bit better. You see, the words sounded like our own, it was like a breath of air from over there. If he'd known his cursing and swearing gave us pleasure. I reckon he wouldn't have done it in Russian, he'd have stuck to his own language. Only one of our fellows, a pal of mine from Moscow, used to get wild with him. 'When he curses like that,' he says, 'I shut my eyes and think I'm in Moscow, having one at the local, and it just makes me dizzy for a glass of beer.'

"Well, the day after I said that about the cubic metres, that commandant had me up on the mat. In the evening an interpreter and two guards came to our hut. 'Sokolov Andrei?' I answered. 'Follow us, quick march, the *Herr Lagerführer* himself wants to see you.' I guessed what he wanted me for. To finish me off. So I said good-bye to my pals, they all knew I was going to my death, took a deep breath and followed the guards. I went across the camp yard, looked up at the stars and said good-bye to them, and I thought to myself: Well, you've had your full dose of torture, Andrei Sokolov,

Number 331. I felt somehow sorry for Irina and the kids, then I got over it and began screwing up my courage to face the barrel of that pistol without flinching, like a soldier should, so the enemy wouldn't see how hard it'd be for me at the last minute to part with this life...

"In the commandant's room there were flowers on the window-sill and it was clean and nice as it is in one of our clubs. At the table there were all the camp's officers. Five of 'em, sitting there, downing schnapps and chewing bacon fat. On the table there was a big opened bottle, bread, bacon fat, soused apples, all kinds of open tins. I took one glance at all that grub, and you wouldn't believe it, but I felt so sick I nearly vomited. I was hungry as a wolf, you see, and I'd forgotten what the sight of human food was like, and now there was all this stuff in front of me. Somehow I kept my sickness down, but it cost me a great effort to tear my eyes away from that table.

"Right in front of me sat Müller, half-drunk, flicking his pistol from one hand to the other, playing with it, and he'd got his eye fixed on me, like a snake. Well, I stood to attention, snapped my broken-down heels together, and reported in a loud voice like this: 'Prisoner-of-war Andrei Sokolov at your service, *Herr Kommandant*.' And he says to me: 'Well, you Russian Ivan, four cubic metres of quarrying is too much for you, is it?' 'Yes *Herr Kommandant*,' I said, 'it is.' 'And is one cubic metre enough to make a grave for you?' 'Yes, *Herr Kommandant* quite enough and to spare.'

"He gets up and says: 'I shall do you a great honour, I shall now shoot you in person for those words. It will make a mess here, so come into the yard, you can sign off out there.' 'As you like,' I told him. He stood thinking for a minute, then tossed his pistol on the table and poured out a full glass of schnapps, took a piece of bread, put a slice of fat on it, held the lot out to me and

says: 'Before you die, Russian Ivan, drink to the triumph of German arms.'

"I was about to take the glass and the bread out of his hand, but when I heard those words, something seemed to burn me inside. Me, a Russian soldier, I thought, drink to the victory of German arms?! What'll you want next, *Herr Kommandant*? You can go to hell with your schnapps!

"I put the glass down on the table, and the bread with it, and I said: 'Thank you for your hospitality, but I don't drink.' He smiles. 'So you don't want to drink to our victory? In that case, drink to your own death.' What had I got to lose? 'To my death and relief from torment then,' I said. And with that, I took the glass and poured it down my throat in two gulps. But I didn't touch the bread. I just wiped my lips politely with my hand and said: 'Thank you for your hospitality. I am ready, *Herr Kommandant*, you can sign me off now.'

"But he was looking at me sharply and he says: 'Have a bite to eat before you die.' So I says to him: 'I never eat after the first glass.' Then he poured out a second and handed it to me. I drank the second and again I didn't touch the food, I was staking everything on courage, you see. Anyway, I thought, I'll get drunk before I go out into that yard to die. And the commandant's fair eyebrows shot up in the air. 'Why don't you eat, Russian Ivan? Don't be shy!' But I stuck to my guns: 'Excuse me, *Herr Kommandant*, but I don't eat after the second glass either.' He puffed up his cheeks and snorted, and then he gave such a roar of laughter, and while he laughed he said something quickly in German, must have been translating my words to his friends. The others laughed too, pushed their chairs back, turned their big mugs round to look at me, and I noticed something different in their looks, something a bit softer like.

"The commandant poured me out a third glass and his hands were shaking with laughter. I drank that glass slowly, bit off a little bit of bread and put the rest down on the table. I wanted to show the bastards that even though I was half dead with hunger I wasn't going to choke myself with the scraps they flung me, that I had my own, Russian dignity and pride, and that they hadn't turned me into an animal as they had wanted to.

"After that the commandant got a serious look on his face, straightened the two iron crosses on his chest, came out from behind the table unarmed and said: 'Look here, Sokolov, you're a real Russian soldier. You're a fine soldier. I am a soldier, too, and I respect a worthy enemy. I shall not shoot you. What is more, today our galant armies have reached the Volga and taken complete possession of Stalingrad. That is a great joy for us, and therefore I graciously grant you your life. Go to your block and take this with you for your courage.' And he handed me a smallish loaf of bread from the table, and a lump of bacon fat.

"I gripped that bread to my chest tight as I could, and picked up the fat in my left hand, and I was so taken aback at this unexpected turn of events that I didn't even say thank you, just did a left-about turn, and went to the door. And all the while I was thinking, now he'll blast daylight through my shoulder blades and I'll never get this grub back to the lads. But no, nothing happened. Again death passed me by and I only felt the cold breath of it.

"I got out of the commandant's room without a stagger, but outside I went reeling all over the place. I lurched into the hut and pitched flat down on the cement floor, unconscious. The lads woke me up when it was still dark: 'Tell us what happened!' Then I remembered what had happened at the commandant's and told them.

'How are we going to share out the grub?' the man in the bunk next to me asked, and his voice was trembling. 'Equal shares all round,' I told him. We waited till it got light. We cut up the bread and fat with a bit of thread. Each of us got a lump of bread about the size of a match-box, not a crumb was wasted, and as for the fat, well, of course, there was only enough to grease your lips with. But we shared it out fair for all.

"Soon they put about three hundred of the strongest of us on draining a marsh, then off we went to the Ruhr to work in the mines. And there I stayed until forty-four. By that time our lads had knocked some of the stuffing out of Germany and the fascists had stopped looking down on us, prisoners. One day they lined us up, the whole day shift, and some visiting *Oberleutnant* said through an interpreter: 'Anyone who served in the army or worked before the war as a driver, one pace forward.' About seven of us who'd been drivers before stepped out. They gave us some old overalls and took us under guard to Potsdam. When we got there, we were split up. I was detailed to work in Todt. That was what the Germans called the set-up they had for building roads and defence works.

"I drove a German major of the engineers about in an Opel-Admiral. That was a fascist hog for you if you like! Short fellow with a pot belly, as broad as he was tall, and a back-side on him as big as any wench's. He had three chins hanging down over his collar in front, and three whopping folds round his neck at the back. Must have carried a good hundred-weight of pure fat on him, I should think. When he walked, he puffed like a steam-engine, and when he sat down to eat—hold tight! He'd go on all day, chewing and taking swigs from his flask of brandy. Now and then I came in for a bit too. He'd stop on the road, cut up some sausage and cheese, and have a drink; and when he was in a good

mood he'd toss me a scrap like a dog. Never handed it to me, oh, no, he considered that beneath him. But be that as it may, there was no comparing it to the camp, and little by little I began to look like a man again, I even began to put on weight.

"For about two weeks I drove the major to and fro between Potsdam and Berlin, then he was sent to the front-line area to build defences against our troops. And then I just forgot how to sleep at night. All night long I'd be thinking how to escape to my own fellows, my own country.

"We drove to the town of Polotsk. At dawn, for the first time in two years I heard the boom of our artillery, and you can guess how my heart thumped at the sound. Why, mate, even when I first started courting Irina, it never beat like that! The fighting was going on east of Polotsk, about eighteen kilometres away. The Germans in the town were sore as hell, and jumpy, and my old pot-belly started drinking more and more. During the daytime he would drive round and he'd give instructions on how to build the fortifications, and at night he'd sit by himself drinking. He got all puffy, and there were great bags under his eyes.

"Well, I thought, no need to wait any longer, this is my chance. And I'm not just going to escape alone, I've got to take old pot-belly with me, he'll come in useful over there!

"Among some ruins I found a heavy iron weight and wound a rag round it, so that if I had to hit him there wouldn't be any blood, picked up a length of telephone wire in the road, got everything ready that I needed, and hid it all under the front seat. One evening, two days before I said good-bye to the Germans, I was on my way back from the filling station and I saw a German *Unter* staggering along blind drunk, grabbing at the wall. I pulled up, led him into a damaged building

and shook him out of his uniform, and took his cap off his head. Then I hid the whole lot under the seat and I was ready.

"On the morning of June 29th, my major told me to take him out of town in the direction of Trosnitsa. He was in charge of some defence works that were being built there. We drove off. The major was sitting on the back seat taking a quiet doze, and I sat in front with my heart trying to jump out of my mouth. I drove fast, but outside the town I slowed down, then stopped and got out and had a look round; a long way behind there were two lorries coming on slowly. I got out my iron weight and opened the door wide. Old pot-belly was lying back on the seat, snoring as if he'd got his wife beside him. Well, I gave him a bang on the left temple with my iron. His head flopped on to his chest. Just to make sure, I gave him another one, but I didn't want to kill him. I wanted to take him over alive, he was going to be able to tell our lads a lot of things. So I pulled the parabel-lum out of his holster and shoved it in my pocket. Then I pushed a bracket down behind the back seat, tied the telephone wire round the major's neck and fastened it to the bracket. That was so he wouldn't tumble over on his side when I drove fast. I pulled on the German uniform and cap, and drove the car straight for the place where the earth was rumbling, where the fighting was.

"I ripped across the German front line between two pill-boxes. A bunch of submachine-gunners popped up out of a dug-out and I slowed down purposely so they would see I had a major with me. They started shouting and waving their arms to show me I mustn't go on, but I pretended not to understand and roared off at about eighty. Before they realized what was happening and opened fire I was on no man's land, weaving round the shell-holes no worse than any hare.

"There were the Germans' firing from behind, and

then our own chaps got fierce and had a smack at me from the front. Put four bullets through the wind-screen, shot up the radiator. But not far away I spotted a little wood near a lake, and some of our chaps running towards the car, so I drove into the wood, flung the door open, fell on the ground and kissed it. And I could hardly breathe.

"A young fellow, with a kind of khaki shoulder-straps on his tunic I'd never seen before, reached me first and says with a grin: 'Aha, you Fritzy devil, lost your way, eh?' I tore off my German tunic, threw the German cap down at my feet, and I says to him: 'You lovely young kid. Sonny boy! Me a Fritz when I was born and bred in Voronezh! I was a prisoner-of-war, see? And now unhitch that fat hog sitting in the car, take his brief-case and lead him off to your commander.' I handed over my pistol and was passed from one person to the next until by the evening I had to report to the colonel in command of the division. By that time I had been fed and taken to the bath-house and questioned, and given a new uniform, so I went to the colonel's dug-out in proper order, clean in body and soul, and properly dressed. The colonel got up from his table, and came up to me, and in front of all the officers there, he takes me in his arms and says: 'Thank you, soldier, for the fine gift you brought us. Your major and his brief-case have told us more than any twenty Germans we might capture on the front line. I shall recommend you for a decoration.' His words and the affection he showed moved me so much I couldn't keep my lips from trembling, and all I could say was: 'Comrade Colonel, I request to be enrolled in an infantry unit.' .

"But the colonel laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. 'What kind of a fighter do you think you'd make when you can hardly stand on your feet? I'm sending you off to hospital straightaway. They'll patch

you up there and put some food inside you, and after that you'll go home to your family for a month's leave, and when you come back to us, we'll think out where to put you.'

"The colonel and all the officers that were in the dug-out with him, shook hands and said good-bye to me in a heart-felt way, and I went out with my head spinning because in the two years I'd been away I'd forgotten what it was like to be treated like a human being. And mind you, mate, it was a long time before I got out of the habit of ducking my head into my shoulders when I had to talk to the high-ups, as if I was still scared of being hit. That was the kind of training we got in those fascist camps....

"As soon as I got into hospital I wrote Irina a letter. I told her in a few words all about how I was taken prisoner and how I escaped with the German major. Where that kid's boasting came from in me, I couldn't tell you. Why, I couldn't even hold back from saying the colonel had promised to recommend me for a medal....

"For a couple of weeks I just slept and ate. They fed me up a little at a time, but often; if they'd given me all the food I wanted, so the doctor said, I might have gone under. But after two weeks was up, I couldn't look at food. There was no reply from home and, I must admit, I began to mope. Couldn't think of eating, sleep wouldn't come to me, and all kinds of bad thoughts kept creeping into my head. In the third week I got a letter from Voronezh. But it wasn't from Irina, it was from a neighbour of mine, a joiner. I wouldn't wish anyone to get a letter like that. He wrote that the Germans had bombed the aircraft factory, and one heavy bomb had fallen plumb on my cottage. Irina and the girls were at home when it dropped.... Well, he wrote that they didn't find a trace of them, and there was only a deep crater where the house had been....

First time I didn't manage to finish reading that letter. Everything went dark before my eyes and my heart squeezed into a tight little ball so that I thought it would never open up again. I lay back on my bed and got a bit of strength back, then I read to the end. My neighbour wrote that Anatoly had been in town during the bombing. In the evening he went to the spot where his home had been, looked at the bomb-crater and went back to town the same night. Before he went, he told my neighbour he was going to volunteer for the front. And that was all.

"When my heart eased up and I heard the blood rushing in my ears, I remembered how Irina had clung to me when we parted at the station. That woman's heart of hers must have known all along we were not to see each other again in this world. And I had pushed her away. . . . Once I had had a family, a home of my own, it had all taken years to build, and it was all destroyed in a flash; and I was left all alone. It must be a dream, I thought, this messed-up life of mine. Why, when I had been a prisoner, nearly every night, under my breath, of course, I had talked to Irina and the kids, tried to cheer them up by telling them I'd come home and they needn't grieve; I'm tough, I said, I can stand it, we'll all be together again one day. So for two years I had been talking to the dead?! . . ."

The big man was silent for a minute, then he said jerkily in a changed, quiet tone: "Let's have a smoke, mate, I feel somehow as if I was choking."

We lighted up. A woodpecker tapped resonantly in the flooded woodland. The warm breeze still rustled the dry leaves of the alders, the clouds were still floating past in the towering blue, as though under taut white sails, but in those minutes of solemn silence the boundless world preparing for the great fulfilment of spring,

for that eternal affirmation of the living in life, seemed quite different to me.

It was too distressing to keep silent and I asked:

"What happened then?"

"What happened then?" the story-teller responded unwillingly. "Then I got a month's leave from the colonel, and a week later I was in Voronezh. I went on foot to the place where I had once lived with my family. There was a deep crater full of rusty water, the weeds all round came up to your waist. Everywhere empty and still, still as a graveyard. I felt it bad then, mate, I can tell you! I stood there and let my soul grieve, then I went back to the station. I couldn't stay there an hour, and the same day I went back to the division.

"But about three months later I did get a flash of joy, like a gleam of sunlight through the clouds. I got news of Anatoly. He sent me a letter from another front. He had got to know my address from that neighbour of mine. It seems he'd been to an artillery college to start with; his gift for mathematics stood him in good stead there. After a year he passed out with honours and went to the front, and now he wrote he had been given the rank of captain, was commanding a battery of 'forty-fives,' and had been awarded six Orders and medals. In a word, he'd left his old man far behind. And again I felt real proud of him. Say what you like, but my own son was a captain and commander of a battery, that was something! And all those decorations too. It didn't matter that his dad was just carting shells and other stuff about in a Studebaker. His dad's time was past, but he, a captain, had everything ahead of him.

"And at nights I began having old man's dreams. When the war was over I'd get my son married and live with them. I'd do a bit of carpentry and look after the kiddies. All the kind of things an old man does. But that all went bust too. In the winter we went on advancing

without a break and there wasn't time to write to each other very often, but towards the end of the war, right up near Berlin, I sent Anatoly a letter one morning and got an answer the very next day. It turned out that he and I had come up to the German capital by different routes and were now very close to each other. I could hardly wait for the moment when we'd meet. Well, the moment came.... Right on the ninth of May, on the morning of Victory Day, my Anatoly was killed by a German sniper.

"In the afternoon I was called up before a company commander. I saw there was a strange artillery officer sitting with him. I went into the room and he stood up as if he was meeting a senior. My company commander said: 'He's come to see you, Sokolov,' and turned away to the window. Something went through me then like an electric shock, because I felt trouble coming. The lieutenant-colonel came up to me and said: 'Bear up, father. Your son, Captain Sokolov, was killed today at his battery. Come with me.'

"I swayed, but I kept my feet. Even now it seems like a dream the way that lieutenant-colonel and I drove in that big car along those streets strewn with rubble. I've only a foggy memory of the soldiers drawn up in line and the coffin covered with red velvet. But my Anatoly I see as plain as I can see you now, mate. I went up to the coffin. Yes, it was my son lying there, and yet it wasn't. My son had been a lad, always smiling, with narrow shoulders and a sharp little Adam's apple sticking out of his thin neck, but here was a young broad-shouldered handsome full-grown man, his eyes were half-closed as if he was looking past me into some far unknown distance. Only the corners of his lips still had a bit of the smile my son used to have. The Anatoly I knew once. I kissed him and stepped aside. The lieutenant-colonel made a speech. My Anatoly's friends were wiping their tears, but I couldn't cry, I reckon the

tears dried up in my heart. Mebbe that's why it still hurts so much.

"I buried my last joy and hope in that foreign German soil, the battery fired a volley to send off their commander on his long journey, and something seemed to snap inside me. . . . When I got back to my unit I was not myself. Soon after that I was demobilized. Where was I to go? To Voronezh? Not for anything! I remembered I had a friend who had been invalided out of the army back in the winter and was living in Uryupinsk; he had asked me to go and live with him once, so I went.

"My friend and his wife had no children and they had their own cottage on the edge of the town. He got a disability pension, but he worked as a driver in a lorry depot and I got a job there too. I settled with my friend and they gave me a home. We used to drive various loads about the suburbs and in the autumn we switched over to grain delivery work. It was then I got to know my new son, the one that's playing down there in the sand.

"First thing you'd do when you got back from a long trip would be to go to a caf' for a bite of something, and of course, you'd put away a glass of vodka to get rid of your tiredness. I had quite a liking for that harmful habit by that time, I must admit. And one day I noticed this lad near the caf', and the next day I noticed him again. What a little ragamuffin he was! His face all smeared with water-melon juice and dust, dirty as anything, hair all over the place, but he'd got a pair of eyes like stars at night after it's been raining! And I felt so fond of him that, funny though it may seem, I started missing him, and I'd hurry to finish my run so I could get back to the caf' and see him sooner. That's where he got his food—he ate what people gave him.

"The fourth day I came in straight from the state farm with my lorry loaded with grain and pulled in at

the caf'. There was my little fellow sitting on the steps, kicking his legs, and pretty hungry by the look of him. I poked my head out of the window and shouted to him: 'Hi, Vanya! Come on, jump aboard, I'll take you to the elevator, and then we'll come back here and have some dinner.' My shout made him start, then he jumped straight from the steps on to the running board and pulled himself up to the window. 'How do you know my name's Vanya?' he says quietly, and he opens those starry eyes of his wide, waiting for my answer. Well, I told him I was just one of those chaps who know everything.

"He came round to the right side, I opened the door and let him in beside me, and off we went. Lively little fellow he was, but suddenly he got quiet, and from time to time gave me a look from under those long curly eyelashes of his, and sighed. Such a little fellow and he'd already learned to sigh. Was that the thing for him to be doing? 'Where's your father, Vanya?' I asked. 'He was killed at the front,' he whispered. 'And Mummy?' 'Mummy was killed by a bomb when we were in the train.' 'Where were you coming from in the train?' 'I don't know, I don't remember....' 'And haven't you got any family at all?' 'No, nobody.' 'But where do you sleep at night?' 'Anywhere I can find.'

"I felt the hot tears welling up in my throat and I made up my mind at once, Why should we suffer alone and separate like this! I'd take him in as my own son. And straightaway I felt easier in my mind and there was a sort of brightness there. I leaned over to him and asked very quiet like: 'Vanya, do you know who I am?' And he just breathed it out: 'Who?' And still as quiet, I says to him: 'I'm your father.'

"Lord alive, what happened then! He threw his arms round my neck, he kissed my cheeks, my lips, my forehead, and started chirping away like a singing bird: 'Daddy dear! I knew it! I knew you'd find me! I knew

you'd find me whatever happened! I've been waiting so long for you to find me!' He pressed himself to me and he was trembling all over, like a blade of grass in the wind. My eyes were misty, and I was trembling too, and my hands were shaking. . . . How I managed to keep hold of the wheel I don't know. Even so I put her in the ditch and stopped the engine. While my eyes were so misty I was afraid to go in case I knocked someone down. We sat there for about five minutes and my little son was still clinging to me for all he was worth, and not saying anything, just trembling. I put my right arm round him, hugged him gently, and turned the lorry round with my left hand and drove back to the cottage where I lived. I couldn't think about going to the elevator after that.

"I left the lorry at the gate, took my new son in my arms and carried him into the house. And he got his little arms round my neck and hung on tight. He pressed his cheek to my unshaven chin and stuck there. And that's how I carried him in. My friend and his wife were both at home. I came in and winked at them with both eyes, and bold and cheerful I says: 'Well, I've found my little Vanya at last. Here we are, good people.' They hadn't got any children themselves and they both wanted a kid, so they guessed what was up straight-away and started bustling around. And I just couldn't get away from my son. But somehow I managed to persuade him. I washed his hands with soap, sat him down at the table. My friend's wife ladled him out a plate of soup, and when she saw how he gulped it down, she just burst into tears. She stood at the stove, crying into her apron. And my Vanya, he saw she was crying, and he ran up to her, tugged at her skirt and said: 'Why are you crying, Auntie? Daddy found me near the café. Everybody ought to be happy, and you are crying.' But she only cried all the harder, made herself all wet, she did!

"After dinner I took him to the barber's and had his hair cut, and at home I gave him a bath myself in a tub and wrapped him up in a clean sheet. He put his arms round me and went to sleep in my arms. I laid him gently in bed, drove off to the elevator, unloaded the grain, took the lorry back to the park and ran off to the shops. I bought him a pair of serge trousers, a little shirt, a pair of sandals and a straw cap. Of course, it all turned out to be the wrong size and no good for quality. My friend's wife even gave me a ticking-off over the trousers. 'Are you crazy,' she says, 'dressing a boy in serge trousers in heat like this!' And the next minute she had the sewing machine on the table and was rummaging in the chest, and in an hour she had a pair of cotton trousers and a little white shirt ready for my Vanya. I took him to bed with me and for the first time for many a night fell asleep peacefully. I woke up about four times in the night though. And there he was, nestling in the crook of my arm, like a sparrow under the eaves, breathing away softly, and I can't find words to tell you how much joy I felt. I'd try not to move so as not to disturb him, but it was no good. I'd get up very quiet, light a match and just stand there, admiring him. . . .

"Just before daybreak I woke up and I couldn't make out why it seemed so stuffy. And it was my little son, he'd climbed out of his sheet and was lying right across my chest, with his little foot on my throat. He's a rare young fidget to sleep with, he is, but I've got used to him, I miss him when he's not there. At night, you can look at him while he's sleeping, or you can smell his curls, and the pain eases off your heart and it feels softer. You see, my heart had got like a lump of stone with grief. . . .

"At first he used to ride with me while I drove the lorry, then I realized that that wouldn't do. What do I need when I'm on my own? A hunk of bread and an onion

with a pinch of salt will last a soldier the whole day. But with him it's different. Now you've got to get him some milk, now you've got to boil an egg for him, and he can't get along without something hot. But I had my work to do. So I plucked up my courage and left him in the care of my friend's wife. Well, he just cried all day, and in the evening ran away to the elevator to meet me. Waited there till late at night.

"I had a hard time with him at first. After one very tiring day we went to bed when it was still light. He used to be always chirruping like a sparrow, but this time he was very quiet. 'What are you thinking about, son?' I asked. He just looks up at the ceiling and asks me: 'What did you do with your leather coat, Daddy?' And I'd never had a leather coat in my life! I had to get round it somehow. 'Left it in Voronezh,' I told him. 'And why were you so long looking for me?' So I said: 'I looked for you, sonny, in Germany, in Poland, and all over Byelorussia, and you turned up in Uryupinsk.' 'Is Uryupinsk nearer than Germany? Is it far from our house to Poland?' And so we went on talking till we dropped off to sleep.

"But do you think there wasn't a reason for his asking about that leather coat, mate? No, there was a reason behind it all right. It meant at some time or other his real father had worn a coat like that, and he had just remembered it. A kid's memory is like summer lightning, you know; it flashes and lights things up for a bit, then dies away. And that was how his memory worked, like the flashes of summer lightning.

"Mebbe we'd have gone on living another year in Uryupinsk together, but in November I had an accident. I was driving along a muddy road through a village and I went into a skid, and there happened to be a cow in the way and I knocked it over. Well, you know how it is, the women raised a hullabaloo, folk came crowding

round, and soon there was a traffic inspector on the spot. I asked him to go easy, but he took my licence away. The cow got up, stuck its tail in the air and went galloping away down the street, but I lost my licence. I went through the winter as a joiner, and then got in touch with an old army friend—he works as a driver in our district—and he invited me to go and stay with him. You can do joinery work for a year, he says, then you can get a new licence in our region. So now my son and I, we're on the march to Kashary.

"But even if I hadn't had that accident with the cow, you know, I'd have left Uryupinsk just the same. My grief won't let me stay in one place for long. Now, when my Vanya gets older and he's got to be sent to school, then, mebbe, I'll knuckle under and settle down. But for the time being we're tramping the Russian land together."

"Does he get tired?" I asked.

"Well, he doesn't walk much on his own feet, most of the time he rides on me. I hoist him on to my shoulder and carry him, and if he wants to stretch his legs, he jumps down and runs about at the side of the road, prancing around like a little goat. All that wouldn't matter, mate, we'd get along all right, the only thing is my heart's got a knock in it somewhere, ought to have a piston changed. Sometimes it gives me such a stab I don't know what I'm doing. I'm afraid one day I may die in my sleep and frighten my little son. And then there's another trouble. Nearly every night I see in my dreams the dear ones I've lost. And mostly it's as if I was behind barbed wire and they were on the other side, at liberty. I talk about everything to Irina and the children, but as soon as I try to pull the barbed wire apart, they go away, seem to melt before my eyes. And there's another funny thing about it. In the daytime I always keep a firm grip on myself, you'll never get a sob

or a sigh out of me, but sometimes I wake up at night and my pillow's wet with tears. . . ."

From the river came the sound of my friend's voice and the splash of oars in the water.

This stranger, who now seemed a close friend of mine, held out his big hand, firm as a block of wood:

"Good-bye, mate, good luck to you!"

"Good luck and a good journey to Kashary!"

"Thank you kindly. Heh, Sonny, let's go to the boat."

The boy ran to his father's side, took hold of the corner of his quilted jacket and started off with tiny steps beside his striding father.

Two orphans, two grains of sand swept into strange parts by the tremendous hurricane of war. . . . What did the future hold for them? I wanted to believe that this Russian, this man of unbreakable will, would stick it out, and that the boy would grow at his father's side into a man who could endure anything, overcome any obstacle if his country called upon him to do so.

I felt sad as I watched them go. Perhaps everything would have been all right at our parting but for Vanya. After he had gone a few paces, he twisted round on his stumpy legs and waved to me with his little rosy hand. And suddenly a soft but taloned paw seemed to grip my heart, and I turned hastily away. No, not only in their sleep do they weep, these elderly men whose hair grew grey in the years of war. They weep, too, in their waking hours. The main thing is to be able to turn away in time. The really important thing is not to wound a child's heart, not to let him see that dry, burning tear on the cheek of a man.

Translated by Robert Daglish



DERENIK DEMIRJYAN

Armenian Author

The oldest Armenian writer of this century, Derenik Demirjyan, left a rich legacy of short stories, plays and novels vividly portraying his country's past and present.

In the article "Youth and Skill," which he wrote shortly before his death in 1956, Demirjyan said: "I know from long years of experience that literature and art do not tolerate timidity. They are like lightning, and lightning can never be timid."

CHARGAH

A Poem

The caravan lent rhythm to the desert, the camels' loaded humps heaving boat-like on the sand-waves.

The travellers were wearied and dulled by the desert.

At the head of the caravan went the *nar*, the proud-headed leading camel; haughtily majestic, he strode along with rocking tread, mounted by the youthful Ningil, and hung with bells—graceful, swinging, ringing.

One by one the other camels followed the *nar* in a mobile mountain range.

Softly one bell called to another, and brought a deep echo.

And the bells swung as they went.

At the head was Ningil. On and on she moved like a sea-wave, while old Ibrahim Khan, lulled to sleep on the next camel, slumped lower and lower.

Then came the packs—fragrant bales, flowery rugs—dipping and rising. Then Ali Nizâm, the khan's estate manager, a puny, wizened ape. In time with him rocked Hussein, the Kermanshah merchant with the curly jet-black beard. Then came old Burhan, the clerk and philosopher, his fiery beard stuck up in the air, his

head grazing the sky. His motion was repeated by the Swedish Iranist and linguist.

Then came more packs and bales and men and rugs, and bells—swinging, ringing.

The khan's eyes, rheumy like an old cat's, were drowsy. It was not long since he had gone to Tehran to have his eyes treated and to attend the hanging of three revolutionaries. (They had set fire to his granaries.)

The three had choked. The sight was said to have amused the old man—he had come to life and laughed like a child. (Scenes such as that always disposed him kindly for a few days.) They said that he, too, was choking—with the wild abundance of his fortress-like house, the blood red of hundreds of rugs, the poisonous fragrance of flower gardens, the wheat wrested from the peasants to the last grain and rotting in his granaries.

The camels rocked, the bells swinging, ringing.

And words flew back and forth from hump to hump.

"Ningil?" It was Ali Nizam speaking. "Her father's a peasant. He refused to give her up, but the khan made him—in payment of a debt. They say he's taking her to his son, but who knows? She cried a good deal, but her tears didn't help. She's like a flower—cries at sunrise and laughs at sunset.... The cinema? I didn't like it. But I met Lady Fatiha there. She lives in Lalehzar, has a daughter of twelve. That's what I call a woman!" Ali Nizam chuckled, and then said with a sigh:

*When Love appears with princely stride,
Modesty must flee or hide.*

A pause.

The bells went on swinging, ringing.

"All the three were hanged. I didn't find it very interesting, but the khan insisted that I go with him to

see it.... The pheasants—how shall I put it?—weren't really fat, and all that evening we racked our brains, trying to guess how the cook had done it. Who was there? The French sales agent, His Excellency, and Mansur Khan. His Excellency liked the port. Yes, it was a great success.... They chopped off the revolutionary's hand.... No, he didn't reach the doctor's. He only got as far as the square and then bled to death. The other one is with the Bakhtiaris. They bribed his comrade to 'lull' him.... It wouldn't do to arrest Zia-ed-Din Dowleh, even though he's grabbed quite a nice sum—thirty thousand tomans.... I suggested that we go back by car, but the khan preferred a camel. His mother doesn't like to see 'Satan's engine' brought near the house. He's very considerate of his mother. Yes, he's very pious—a real saint.... And then the road is so bumpy—it hasn't changed a bit since our forefathers' days."

The wick of daylight flickered in the west, and the day died.

Like hump-backed centuries, the coppery camels marched on, ringing with songs as ancient and melancholy as the ages.

Ding! a bell called to another. *Dong!* the other called back. Tinkling rivulets rang and rippled in the air.

The road lay brooding.

It was like a river, narrow and sorrowful; it ran into towns and villages, gathering sorrow and thoughts and carrying them from land to land. Along it conquerors had come in ringing caravans, and gone to vanish in the distance. Caravans had passed here, carrying in their packs wheat, rose water, dates, opium, byssin, poison, sealed death sentences, love greetings. So much hope, so much sorrow....

Riza was thinking as he walked along beside Ningil's camel. He was dishevelled and dusty. Sand and stone gnawed at his thick-skinned toes. His shoes were tattered, broken into foam.

He was grumbling about Ningil.

"That a dog like that should have got her! What a shame!"

He said as much to the caravaneer walking beside him. The man looked at him askance.

"Mind your own business."

Riza was a tramp, and carried a bag slung over his shoulder. He had been a workman in Anglo-Persian Oil, a stevedore in Bandar Bushire, a labourer in Gilan. But above all else he was a tramp. Now he was going with a caravan. Where? Where his destiny might lead him—to a bright new day, or perhaps to the gallows. He was not alone. There were thousands of men like him roaming Iran, telling stories in caravansaries. They wove them from the lives of peasants, or from their own adventures. The well-to-do spurned those stories, but the toilers and the poor listened gladly. The stories were ablaze with golden flames devouring granaries, and ran red with blood; there were tears and danger in them both for the teller and the listener.

The caravaneer was a sullen man, steeped in misfortune and worldly experience. He was wary of Riza but did not resent him.

Riza fell a little behind, and walked abreast of Ibrahim Khan's camel. He lowered stealthily at the khan whose face might have been a shrivelled crab-apple. He walked along by the khan's side, his skull-cap pushed to the back of his head, his hands behind his back, his forehead, the huge, angular forehead of a peasant, dripping sweat—bitter and stinging.

Then Riza closed his eyes. And with his eyes shut he saw a distressing vision. The sun was devouring the field with its yellow mouth. A withered girl of ten, the colour of lemon, was picking Ali Nizam's cotton field. She had large eyes and nothing much else—the rest was just a scraggy skeleton. Like a leech the fever had sucked her dry, leaving nothing but her eyes and sorrow. In those eyes there was a yearning for life, but the grin of death had already tainted their dark glitter. She had grown old without having been young.

That was what Riza's daughter had looked like when he had left her in the field and started home. A man crushing stone at the roadside had given him a wink. Riza had walked over under the pretext of asking the man for a light.

"The Gilanis are in jail, Fable was hanged. Wick is gone. Get away too."

His wife lay in bed, dying. She moaned without asking for help. She had not been out in the field for a month. She got no pay, she could do nothing but die. Death was long in coming, and that made it still more painful to her than to the others. Beside her a wizened baby tossed in high fever.

Riza went to the hen-coop where not a hen was left, pulled his oiled knife out of a crevice in the wall and hid it carefully in his clothes. He took some black tobacco, gall-bitter like his life, and looked into the empty bread-basket. He pondered—it lasted a lifetime—and went back to his wife. She did not look at him, he tried to say something but could not think of a word—he had too much to say. He walked out, spat viciously on the ground which had never sprouted a single flower of joy for him, and went back to the field to pick cotton.

Evening came. Ali Nizam's labourers went home. Riza stayed by the brook to wash his feet. The eve-

ning darkened to rust brown then to black. And Riza plunged into the night, heading for distant parts that were full of hazards.

“‘The Gilanis are in jail, Fable was hanged, Wick is gone.’”

The skein had started to unwind. He was the next, then it would be the others who were now wandering through town and country, dishevelled and haggard, and as bitter as the poison in the pipe bowl.

Riza walked on, carrying his life with him, reflecting that blood is thicker than water.

Ding-a-ling. Riza started.

Mounted on the darkly sorrowful camel, Ningil glided on, fleeing through the air like a miracle, and Riza followed her, bruising his feet on the rugged road.

What was it that made Ningil so enticing, that made Riza burn within? Was it that she was as gay as a blazing fire and filled the air with ecstasy, or was it something else?

There she was rocking to the rhythm of the caravan. She was beautiful as, straining from the camel's back like the arrow from the bowstring, she strove impetuously towards the horizon. She had become one with the camel, and the whole moved solemnly on as might a poem.

And whereas Ningil smiled, the *nar* glared angrily ahead. They had adorned him lavishly, but the adornments were alien to him, and underneath them smouldered his wrath. Neither his sweet burden nor the adornments could cheer him up. Hung with golden bells and silk tassels, he was indifferent to his beautiful accoutrements. He was proud—one look at him would have shown it. He strode on like Time, all eyes on him but his on no one. He raised his head and turned it to the right, then to the left, gazing into the distance like a proud prophet about to pronounce his curse upon the

world. It was a moment when his eyes were spitting hatred. Resentfully he walked on, groaning inwardly. Was it because of the load or the heat, or was he hungry, or tired? Now he sent a roar into the distance, an ancient roar thousands of years old, a roar choking with the bitter froth of hatred.

There was a peculiar note to that roar, however—a note of deep, boundless grief.

And that was the only way in which the *nar* made his discontent known—otherwise he suffered in silence and secrecy.

The linguist peered at the camel, wondering whether it was possible to decipher the beast, to learn the cause of its sullenness. He roused Firebeard.

“Why is the camel so sad, Mirza?”

Firebeard did not hear. He was staring ahead, his day-dreaming eyes misty.

The merchant responded for him.

“‘What else is there for a camel to do but bear its burden and be sad?’”

The camels rocked, the *nar* tinkled his bells, Ningil swayed.

The linguist indicated Ningil with his eyes.

“But if the camel knew what a sweet burden it’s carrying!”

Firebeard philosophized:

*While night in melancholy has to end,
Upon its sombre wing comes day,
Roseate and smiling, ever gay.
For such is life, my friend.*

“Life!” The linguist smiled, musing.

*Would man know the joy, the bliss of the morn
If not for the night, so sad and forlorn?
Such is life, my friend.*

The linguist said:

"So life rejoices only after torment. That's a paradox, Mirza."

The mirza smiled scornfully.

*Life cannot rest, or feelings quell:
Ever in torment, ever in sadness,
Ever in laughter, ever in gladness.
Why is it so, who can tell?*

And the caravan went on, swinging, ringing. The mirza said:

*He who the fire flower made,
With subtle poison had it sprayed
To give it beauty. For behold!
Some poison all things lovely hold.
Carefree laughter rings with tears,
A veil of tears the sunrays pierce.
There'd be no beauty in our lives
If tears weren't blended with the smiles.*

And the caravan went on, swinging, ringing.
Suddenly the desert howled.

It was Riza, who had left the road and moved away to let his voice ring freely. And it was he who was howling like a tormented wolf.

It was a song of assault, the battle-song of the caravan that starts, advances menacingly, and strikes with might and main. In it the camels were fighters, the bells rang with a call to battle, and the assailants tossed on the camels' backs like a whirlwind and swept roaring towards the enemy.

They listened—it was the "Chargah."

Now the bells rang differently, and the camels rocked differently as they went on, the bells swinging, ringing. . . .

Riza howled and protested, and then drew near the caravan and finished his song, adding under his breath:

" 'The Gilanis are in jail, Fable was hanged, Wick is gone.' Ah, Ningill!"

And he flashed his eyes at her.

He had not sung the last lines but had uttered them with a sneer, then had growled angrily and spat out.

"What's that you're singing, friend?"

It was Ali Nizam speaking.

"Oh, just a song."

"It's a thieves' and robbers' song."

"Anyway, it's a song of the road. You walk and walk and there's no end to the road, and then you sing and there you are at the end of your journey."

An arrogant smile wrinkled Ali Nizam's nose cankered by vice.

"What do you want to end it for? Just keep walking."

"You're riding a camel, so you don't care. Come down, then you'll know."

"What's wrong with walking?"

"Nothing. You wear through your shoes and socks, and the skin of your feet."

"So let it wear through—you'll grow new skin."

"It gets at your soul and the soul has no skin."

"So let your soul wear through."

Ali Nizam chuckled, and so did Hussein, the Kermanshah merchant.

And the caravan went on, the bells swinging, ringing.

"All right, we'll now pitch camp."

The khan needed a rest, although caravans usually travel at night. He wished to enjoy some coffee in the night's cool, and to sleep a little. His palace was still far off.

The caravaneer caught hold of the *nar*'s rope bridle and hung on to it. The other camels flocked together and halted. The song of the bells ran out, none but an occasional drop of sound falling on the sand.

"Alight."

The camels knelt, 'hill-like.

Sleepy with fatigue, the travellers alighted on the sand.

They walked off the road, spread out rugs and mats on the stones. Down glided Ningil from the *nar*'s back, and stepped into the carpeted rose garden of the khan's tent that opened its arms to enfold her.

The travellers—Firebeard, Ali Nizam, the merchants—sat round the fires.

A little way off the camel-drivers settled down.

Then silence fell. The desert strained its ear. Only the rosaries went *click-click*. And the fires roared.

The *nar* would not calm down.

They lashed him with a rope to bring him to his knees, but he did not yield—he jibbed and roared.

"He's roaring as if he were badly hurt and protesting and refusing to forgive. He's voicing some sort of discontent," the linguist inferred.

Hussein, the Kermanshah merchant, leant back against his packs.

"It isn't discontent," he said, slowly stringing the words in time with the beads of his rosary. "A camel will roar, no matter whether it's loaded or not, whether it's hungry or has its belly full. It's just a roar"—Hussein drew in the smoke—"without any meaning." He blew out the smoke. "It doesn't even know when it's roaring. Doesn't even hear its roar."

"But it wants something," the linguist ventured.

"It has wanted something for thousands of years. For thousands of years it has gone in caravans. When

you look at a camel you think you know what it is. But nobody knows the camel. It's an unaccountable animal."

The rosaries went *click-click*.

"The camel is a taciturn animal, it never complains. That roar isn't its inner voice. A camel goes on for days and weeks and months without asking for food or rest—it's unexacting and taciturn. It never reveals what's inside it. Look, you'd say it is sleeping. But it only seems so. A short nap is all a camel wants for sleep. It doesn't give itself away even when it's dying. It just kneels and puts its neck on the sand and gives a groan—and that's the end of it."

"Perhaps it's proud."

"Who knows?"

"And of course it must have some grief. What do you say, Mirza?"

The mirza was stringing the beads of his rosary as he might his thoughts.

"A camel's grief is obscure—who can tell anything about it? It is hurt. Fate has inflicted a deep wound on it, a wound that the camel can't forget. The camel is life itself."

And the mirza's thoughts died into silence. Only his rosary went *click-click*.

The linguist pondered for a long time and concluded:

"But there's something sadly majestic about a camel's appearance."

"It's the majesty of the desert," muttered the mirza.

The balmy breeze toyed with the glowing curls of the fire. Shadows danced above the desert, and the velvety sky blossomed with the embroidery of stars.

"It's a stupid animal!" cried Ali Nizam.

"Yes," echoed his roused companions.

"Very stupid. It has been working from generation to generation for thousands of years, but it hasn't got used to its work, it won't become reconciled to its task. Now what's a camel's task? To carry loads. But mark that whether you're loading or unloading it, it's always grumbling, always jibbing. Its only concern is, when it's on the way and moving, to stock its intricate stomach with as much food as it can. Neither habit nor care have any effect on it. It has no attachment for its master and doesn't even feel who is riding it—whether its own master or a stranger. It won't try to throw you off—it isn't clever and ingenious enough to do so. But if you fall it won't stop or look back, it will just go on—no matter which way, no matter who catches it. But the remarkable thing is that when you're mounting it, it will twist back its neck again and again to bite you if possible, and each time you have to hit it hard on the head to make it turn away again."

"But, really, it's a hardy worker, a tame beast."

"Tame?" Ali Nizam grinned like a hyena. "If you mean to say it's stupid I agree with you."

The desert was brooding.

And the rosaries went *click-click*.

Firebeard looked up.

Life comes into the desert with the caravan

But are not life and camel one?

For else the sands would overrun

The towns and hamlets built by man.

"But it's a strange animal," added the linguist.

"Well, that's what it's like," Hussein the merchant put in.

And there was a long pause.

After which another merchant said:

"It's like man—it has its own whims."

Someone stirred in the darkness.

"It's like the people," came a low growl from the darkness as from an ambush.

The company turned to look. It was Riza. His voice was hollow, as if he had spoken through a prison wall.

A match flared up with a yellow flame, lighting Riza's dark face, coarse and stern.

"The camel is a patient beast. That's why you have to be careful with it."

"Why?"

"It may spit at you. And its spittle has poison in it."

"There's no poison in it—just nastiness." Ali Nizam pointed at the *nar*. "There, look. Once I clubbed it so hard that my hands hurt for two days."

"Why?"

"They put a load on it. It was the khan's luggage. The beast wouldn't get up. It's like a labourer. You must first hit it hard on the head." And he glared at Riza.

Riza was smoking. The elusive, lithe smoke floated out of his mouth in bitter curls, wavered and hid in the air.

Riza's face was gashed from brow to chin by a black scar.

"It was the last droughty year," he spoke up, as if talking to himself. "Many people got rich at that time. The khan rotted two thousand *khalvars* of wheat in pits, remember? His barns were bursting with grain. No place to store it. The people were dying like flies, but nobody wanted to buy any wheat. The people are so stupid."

He paused.

"Oh, you can tell fairy-tales, can't you?" Smiling maliciously, Ali Nizam peered into the darkness where Riza was.

"I've told some."

"You've also told 'fire tales,' haven't you?"

"What's that? I've never heard of them."

"You will, in Tehran!"

Ali Nizam laughed, winking at the merchants. They laughed too.

"What is a 'fire tale'?" queried the linguist.

Ali Nizam grew venomous.

"It begins with wheet barns and ends in a soaped noose. Those bandits tramp all over Iran and sit with peasants near the khan's barns and tell them fairy-tales. Those tales spit fire that burns up the barns. The scum!"

And he twisted a few oaths in his ape's mouth.

Riza was silent. So was the desert.

The rosaries went *click-click*.

The caravan was asleep.

It was dark in the desert, and there were fairy-tales moving about in it like shadows. Unaccountable as camels, they spread the sadness of camels everywhere. It was dark in the desert. The desert itself was a vast kneeling camel, its black, sad humps cutting into the sky.

And above, in the blue book of the universe, were fiery thoughts burning, and those thoughts were life. It was written above in sulphur letters—eternity.

The night was spinning its distaff—the desert had begun to whisper.

A yellow moon thrust up its ghastly head from the earth as from the grave.

The *nar* was silhouetted against the sky. He had not knelt to sleep. He stood there like a prophet gravely watching the march of the ages.

Ali Nizam went towards the big carpet tent where the khan and Ningil were sleeping. He approached the entrance, across which Mahmed, the khan's attendant,

lay sprawling like a hound. Ali Nizam stopped and, his face to the khan's tent, strained his ear. The khan was apparently asleep. But Ali Nizam fancied he could hear a whisper coming from the tent, along with the sound of breathing. As he listened he felt jealous—tantalizingly, delightfully jealous—and was overwhelmed by an irresistible curiosity and an urge to run away.

Standing in the wan moonlight, Ali Nizam recalled that evening he had spent in Tehran with a young woman, and the warmth of her body came back to him....

A pair of blunt tongs caught the back of Ali Nizam's neck and squeezed it. It was the *nar*'s teeth. Ali Nizam gave a yell and then—then the desert sank away, the sky whirled, the stars came under his feet, the earth swept up. His puny ape's body squirmed, jerked up and dangled from the camel's teeth, and then the beast began to drag him back and forth over the sand.

Finally the camel gave him a powerful shake, put him down and stood still, with the dull immobility of the beast.

The caravan awoke. Men sprang up. The camel-drivers and the khan's attendants flung themselves upon the *nar*. He remained dull and motionless, looking at them impassively even when blows began to hail upon him.

The caravaneer ran up. Clinging to the *nar*'s neck, he cursed the beaters furiously. A fierce fight broke out between him and the attendants. He snarled like a wild beast, he gasped and howled as he took the blows showering both on him and on the *nar*.

Ningil ran out and stared in terror, unable to understand why they were beating the camel.

The khan's chief attendant sprang up, axe in hand. His cheeks were twitching. The caravaneer was

dragged off. The attendant came waddling like a gorilla and brought his axe down on the camel's forehead with tremendous force. The camel dropped mutely to his knees. The attendant went on striking the camel with pent-up fury. The camel was silent—he was dead already, and that seemed to enrage the beater all the more. And the more blows came down, the more hideous the camel became, and as he turned more hideous the blows gathered fury. The camel spat out all his hideousness in a repulsive pulp of blood, brains, and bones. But the beater had not won. The camel was not defeated, he had resisted in his own way to the last. He had remained sad, silent, hideous, and full of hatred.

And secretive.

The *nar*'s bells were smashed to bits, and their song choked, shedding its sounds on the sand.

The camel sprawled motionless and hideous, giving off a damp smell mixed with the smell of sand.

They swathed Ali Nizam's corpse in a blanket like a mummy.

"The cursed beast!" growled the man with the axe. "Never talks, never lets you know anything, and then does something foul, the way it did now."

"But what happened? Why did it do that?" asked the linguist uneasily.

"It was vengeance—the camel took its revenge."

This came from Riza.

The caravan pulled away. As sombre as a black hill, the camel's carcass lay in the smooth desert, its dumb tongue stretched out on the sand.

Translated by S. Apresyan



AKSEL BAKOUNTS

There are stories that imperceptibly usher you not only into the psychology of their characters, but also into that of the author.

It is stories such as these that Aksel Bakounts wrote. He began his literary career by penning a little fairy-tale when he was a boy of twelve. He did not write much, but the little he did write—a volume of short stories and two novels that he had no chance to finish—placed him among Armenia's prominent authors.

CYCLAMENS

To the memory of Arphenik Charents

The sky is overcast above Fort Kaqavaberd most of the year. Through the white clouds veiling the crenellated walls, only the high towers loom black here and there. Seen from a distance, the fort does not look like ruins and you feel as though there were guards posted on the towers, as though the iron gates were barred and locked, and at any moment you expect a sentinel to challenge someone coming up the rocky slope.

When the wind scatters the clouds and the wisps melt in the valleys, you can see the walls, half buried in earth and overgrown with shrubs, and the inclined top of the main tower. There are no iron gates and no sentinels.

Silence broods over the ruins of Kaqavaberd. It is unbroken but for the Basuta roaring in the valley below, scouring its banks and polishing the blue quartz of its bed. The river winds down its narrow bed, and it seems as though under the white foam a thousand hounds were howling and gnawing at their stone chains.

Vultures and buzzards nest on the walls. At the sound of a footfall ringing out beneath the walls, the birds screech wildly as they fly up from their nests to wheel in huge circles above the fort. Then the moun-

tain eagle takes wing, its beak curved like a scimitar, its talons spear-sharp, its feathers as steely as armour.

The only flower that grows at the height of Kaqavaberd is the cyclamen, its stalk as red as the foot of a partridge, its blossom crimson. It sprouts on the rocky ground beneath the walls. When clouds enwrap the grim walls the cyclamen droops its head on the rock warmed by the sun. To the bright-coloured beetle steeped in pollen the cyclamen seems like a cradle and the world like a crimson flower garden.

In the valley below, on the other bank of the Basuta, a few houses perch on the cliffs. In the mornings there is smoke above them—it curls up in blue ribbons to melt in the clouds. In the noonday heat the cocks can be heard crowing in the village, and in time with their call some old rustic yawns in the shade of his house, tracing patterns in the sand with his walking-stick and turning over in his mind the things he has lived through.

Both in the village and at the fort, time glides on at a drowsy pace and the years are like the leaves of one and the same tree. That is why the old man's memory is confused. The river roars in the same cadence as before, the rocks and eagles are ever the same.

The river has seen countless generations come and go; they spread their patched felt mats on the muddy ground and built reed tents, and every spring, when the cyclamen broke into blossom at the foot of Kaqavaberd, they drove out their goats and sheep to graze on the slopes below the fort and filled their bags with cheese, and in winter they gnawed their hard millet bread and nibbled goat cheese.

One sunny day three horsemen were making their way up to Fort Kaqavaberd. The first two riders' cos-

tume and seat revealed them as townsmen who had never gone out so far afield.

The third rider was a guide, and whereas the others clung to the manes of their mounts, bending low to keep their balance, he was humming a melody that was as mournful and dismal as the barren valley, the cheerless rocks and the distant village.

Now and again the clouds enveloping the top of the fort drew back, revealing the walls, then shrouded it anew. The first rider kept looking at the fort. He was thinking of its history, of what was written in parchment scrolls about those princely times when the hoofs of armour-clad horses stamped the ground in front of the iron gate while their riders, back from a raid, flourished their spears. His bespectacled eyes—the eyes of a scholar—saw armour-clad men, saw the historian writing their praise with a reed pen, and he heard the clatter of the horses of times long past. How strenuous the rocky incline seemed to him, the incline which the one-time occupants of the fort had climbed as easily as ibexes.

After they had reached the tents the first horseman rode on without halting. He was looking for the ancient road and paid no heed to the half-naked children playing in the ashes in front of the tents, nor to the goats shaking their heads in astonishment.

The second horseman, a man in a felt hat, was not after any antiquities at Kaqavaberd. All he carried with him was a thick sketch-book and a sharp-pointed pencil. Whenever a face, a picturesque spot or a mossy rock arrested him he sketched what his eyes had seen.

The first horseman was an archaeologist and the second an artist.

Near the tents the three riders were attacked by the dogs. The barking brought a few people out of the tents. They stared at the arrivals. The children playing

in the ashes watched the dogs fly barking at the horses. The third rider—he was the guide—tried in vain to put off the dogs with his whip. Barking furiously, the dogs accompanied the horsemen to the walls of the fort, then came back frolicking.

The stones of Kaqavaberd seemed to have come alive to speak with the archaeologist. He walked up to this or that slab and bent to look, to take a measurement, to scribble a note, or raked away the loose earth with his foot, laying bare the lower edge of the slab. He climbed on to the wall, leaned out of the watchtower and gave a loud cry when he saw a writing engraved on a stone of the tower.

The guide, who had turned the horses loose and sat near the wall, smoking, sprang up at the archaeologist's outcry. He thought that the bespectacled man had been bitten by a snake.

The artist drew the crumbling walls, the pinnacle and the remnants of inner walls. He made a sketch of the fort entrance and paused awhile, pencil in hand, for, startled by his footfall, a vulture had flown out of its nest with a screech and begun to wheel above the fort. As they heard the screech other vultures took wing.

Shying at the vultures, the horses laid their ears and drew close to each other. And when the archaeologist shouted from the tower that he had found Prince Bakur's tomb the artist could not make it out. He was watching the wheeling vultures, fascinated by the powerful sweep of their wings, by their scarlet, scimitar-shaped beaks, by the majesty of their circling flight. He stood still with poised pencil and did not feel his hat slip off and drop on the rocky ground.

A man with a sickle stuck under his belt and a dirty handkerchief wrapped round his head came out of a tent and up the rocky slope, leaning on a staff. He

saw the bespectacled one pull out a stone and asked the guide who the newcomers were and what they were looking for in the ruins of the fort. The guide, who was at a loss for an answer at first, said that it was written in books that there was a treasure of gold buried in a *karas** at Kaqavaberd.

The reaper pondered, scratched his shoulder and headed for the valley to reap his millet patch. He spoke to himself as he went: What if he had been the one to discover that treasure? How often he had sat on the stone which the bespectacled one had pulled out! If he had known, all that wealth would now be his. The number of cows he could have bought!

He was still sunk in thought when he found himself facing his millet patch. He threw off his useless thoughts together with his coat and began to reap his millet.

Cyclamens had sprouted near the stones of the fort. But the archaeologist saw neither cyclamens nor grass. He trampled both grass and flowers underfoot.

To him the world was a vast museum with not a living creature, not a beetle, in it. He tore the ivy off the rocks it entwined, uprooted with the tip of a stick the cyclamens growing in the crevices, stroked the rock and brushed the earth off inscriptions.

When the man in the felt hat had sketched all that the archaeologist needed, he sketched, on a new page, a portion of the wall between jagged rocks, the nest of a mountain eagle, and cyclamens at the foot of the wall.

They left the fort in the afternoon. Before they started downhill the archaeologist made another round

* A very large earthenware wine-jug.—*Tr.*

of the fort and jotted down something in his notebook; then he hurried to the horses.

It was the guide who led the way this time. While the archaeologist's mind was taken up with Prince Bakur and ancient scrolls and while the artist was thinking of cyclamens and listening to the deep roar of the Basuta, the guide saw nothing in his mind's eye but fresh *lavash* bread, cheese and yoghurt.

He unsaddled the horses by the first tent they arrived at, tethered them with their bridles and walked into the tent through the narrow opening. The horses nibbled eagerly at the fresh grass.

Inside the tent a little boy was baking mushrooms in the hot ashes of the hearth. The arrival of the three visitors perplexed him—he was not sure whether he should leave the mushrooms and run for his mother or whether he should take the mushrooms with him. However, the patter of his mother's bare feet and the rustling of her dress reassured him; he fished a baked mushroom out of the ashes and put it on the hearth stone.

His mother came in. She pulled her kerchief over her eyes and offered the guests two cushions from the bedding heaped up in a corner.

The guide took some tins out of the archaeologist's bag.

"We're hungry, sister," he said. "Give us some yoghurt if you've got any, and make some tea. We have the sugar."

The woman drew near the hearth, pushed the boy's mushrooms aside and stooped to blow at the smoking cakes of dung. Her kerchief slipped back and the man in the felt hat saw her white forehead, black hair and dark eyes.

He gazed at the woman kneeling in front of the smoking hearth. He had seen a face like hers some-

where—the same white forehead and deep violet eyes. When she rose to fetch the trivet and the smoke-blackened tea-kettle she drew so close to him that he could see deep into her eyes and could discern the ash powder that lay on her eyebrows and hair.

It had been so very long ago. But how could two faces be so much alike, even to the lips? The Kaqava-berd woman's face was slightly bronzed. But her eyes were shaped just like the other woman's, who was as tall and slim-waisted as she.

Silently and swiftly the woman was making tea. Whenever she bent down, got up, or walked barefoot on the mat her silvery bracelets tinkled like tiny bells. Her dress rustled, its hem reaching down to her bare feet.

The other woman's clothes had also rustled like that; but she had worn a grey overcoat and a black velvet hat with a long, orange-headed pin. She was far, very far away. Perhaps the Basuta, merging with some other river, reached the sea on whose sandy beach the two of them—the other woman and the artist—had sat one day.

The guide opened a second tin. The archaeologist never looked up from the table-cloth and the copper plates. The boy ate up his mushrooms and stared at the bright tin, waiting for it to be emptied. The guide saw it and held out the tin.

The boy shook out the contents—the dog lying in front of the tent swallowed the pieces of meat and licked its gums. Then the boy ran out to show the other children the white tin, a thing never seen in that rocky region.

Sitting in front of the hearth, the woman lifted the lid of the tea-kettle every now and then to look at the water. She stirred the fire and pushed the cakes of dung closer together, and when the smoke billowed up,

seeping out through the interstices of the reed walls, she put her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes.

To the artist the woman, whose knees were clearly outlined under the long dress, seemed like a priestess in front of a tripod, soothsaying by the movements of the smoke.

The other woman had never gone barefoot or sat in front of smoking dung. The morning sea had swayed like molten bronze, lapping the limestone of the shore. On the beach the woman in the black velvet hat had traced designs in the sand with the tip of her parasol and destroyed them. And he had sat there snapping a dead twig he held in his hand into tiny bits, and the waves had rolled up to their feet and drawn back, sweeping away the bits of the twig. That day the woman on the beach had given a pledge, and the world had seemed like a vast sea and his heart had merged with that sea.

But the days that followed brought separation—so accidental and yet so irreparable. His memory retained a pair of violet eyes, a grey overcoat and the tip of a parasol, with which she had written her pledge in the sand and destroyed it at once.

The water boiled in the kettle, rattling the lid. The woman took saucers out of a basket and set flowered glasses on the table-cloth. Once when she stooped over the table-cloth her braided hair strayed off her back and swung over her breast. The woman on the beach had short hair and a white neck, with the blue veins showing through the delicate skin.

The boy rushed in with the empty tin in his hand. A bevy of children stood in front of the tent, peeping in at the visitors seated on the mat. The boy was delighted to get another tin. This time he did not run out but sat on the mat. His mother poured him some tea. and

the artist slipped a big lump of sugar into the boy's glass.

The happy boy looked at the bubbles floating up from the sugar and then stuck a finger into the glass to take out the lump. The hot tea scalded his finger but he did not cry out—the half-melted sugar was so sweet. The archaeologist grinned, recalling something from the days of ancient man. The woman refilled the kettle, and smiled fondly at the child's prank.

The artist saw her smile—it was so familiar. Apparently people who have the same kind of face smile alike. The woman's upper lip quivered imperceptibly, the smile tinged her lips as red as carnation petals and made her eyes shine.

Impulsively he took out his sketch-book, leafed through the sketches of rocks and statues and the mountain eagle's nest on the wall, and with swift strokes sketched the woman sitting by the hearth, her eyes on the hearth stone. Her features were familiar to him—his mind had worked on them years ago. He could see her profile even with his eyes shut.

It was only the boy who saw his mother sketched on the white paper. He fancied that the white sheets in the hands of the man in the felt hat reflected things like clear spring water.

Awhile later the horses stood in front of the tent. The guide was bridling them and tightening the saddle girths. When he had fastened the bag to the saddle he came up to say good-bye to the woman sitting by the hearth. She rose, quickly pulled her kerchief over her forehead and timidly took the proffered hand. The two other men came up in their turn. But the woman only pressed her hand to her breast and bowed. The man in the felt hat gave the boy a silver coin and stroked his hair.

The horses started down the Kaqavaberd slope towards the Basuta valley. Holding on to their bridles were three men each of whom was weaving his own pattern of thoughts. Cyclamens grew on either side of the path. The man in the felt hat bent down, picked a cyclamen and put it in his sketch-book, at the page on which he had drawn the trivet and the slim-waisted woman.

The horses' hoofs loosened stones and sent them hurtling into the valley. A sea was heaving in the artist's mind—it washed ashore a short-trimmed head in a black velvet hat, then a woman in a long dress and with braids of long hair down her back, then stone statues and half-decayed walls with crimson cyclamens at their foot....

Dusk fell.

A man was plodding up the same path, towards the tents, with a sickle of shining steel under his belt. He was tired after reaping the short-stemmed millet all day, and his back ached. That was why his climb was so slow, why he leaned so heavily on his staff, stopping occasionally to catch his breath. Whenever he halted his knees shook.

He was the man whom the guide had told the story of the treasure earlier in the day. From his millet patch he had seen the horsemen and had thought he saw, in the saddle-bags, the treasure that had lain for centuries under the rocks on which he had always sat as he grazed goats and sheep in the ruins of the fort. Galled by this thought or perhaps by fatigue, the man was as sullen as a hungry bear prowling the forest at nightfall.

He arrived at the first tent, kicked the dog who had run out to meet him, wagging its tail, and flung the

sickle into a corner. Then he put his staff down by the fireside and sat in silence on the mat.

The hearth was smoking. There was water boiling in the tea-kettle. Two lumps of sugar lay on a pillow where the bed-sheets were rolled up. The reaper had not yet taken off his shoes nor shaken the millet-ears out of his socks when his wife came in, her bracelets tinkling, the folds of her long dress swishing, with the boy clinging to her skirts, the two empty tins in his hands.

The boy ran up to his father to show the tins. His father realized that the horsemen had sat on the mat in his tent. The boy happily showed him the silver coin that the stranger had given him.

The father shoved the boy and his empty tins aside. The tins rolled away and so did the boy. Then the boy sprang up and ran after the tins. Picking them up, he clutched at his mother's skirt and burst out crying. The man softened and asked the boy to show him the silver coin. Smiling through his tears, the boy came up, with the coin closed in his fist. Then he told his father that the stranger had had a shining object with white sheets in it. He said the man who had given the coin had drawn Mother's picture on a sheet and taken it away with him.

Jealousy struck the sullen reaper's heart like a thunderbolt. His eyes opened wide, his face blanched. The mother looked at the boy, her face flushing. The father saw it. The next moment the man leaped up like an enraged bear, his hairy hands grabbed the heavy staff and brought it down on his wife's back with terrific force.

Her bracelets jingled, her long braids shook. The kettle on the trivet tilted. The tip of the broken staff flew into the pile of bedding. The woman did not scream—she writhed with pain. She put her hand to

her back and staggered out of the tent to sob silently outside.

With the empty tins in his hands, the boy followed her and huddled beside her. The man grumbled for a while, then ate some millet bread and sprawled on the mat, his fur cap under his head.

Stillness descended on Kaqavaberd. The fire went out in the hearths, and darkness enfolded the earth. The dogs, fearful of wild beasts, crouched in front of the tents. The sheep lay down on the grass. The woman stretched out on the mat, covering the boy with a blanket of thick felt.

Like a giant snail, a cloud slid from the top of Kaqavaberd down to the tents, dripping moisture on rocks and moss, and night dampness settled on the wool of the flocked sheep. Dew-drops wetted the petals of cyclamens.

A beetle, drunk with the fragrance, was asleep in a flower cup and the world seemed to it like a balmy garden full of cyclamens.

Translated by S. Apresyan



YON DRUTSA

When I was a little boy I had no shoes and when the road was muddy Father carried me to school on his back. On the way he often asked me doubtfully, "Do you think you'll grow up to be something?"

I now have three small books to my credit, but Father doesn't seem to be impressed. I imagine he's waiting to see what comes out next, because he hopes that some day I shall repay the debt that brought me into literature. I mean the debt I owe to the Moldavian village which, though not on the map, loves so well that the spring never leaves it. In autumn the villagers shut up the spring in their homes, and release it again in late March.

The Author

THE SLEDGE

When he saw that the walnut-tree in front of the house was dead, old Mihail picked up his staff, pulled his hat over his eyes and began to walk round it, as if counting the branches. He spanned the trunk both by sight and by hand and tried whether the bark would peel. It wasn't until about sundown, when he thought his boots had become a bit heavy, that he put his staff back in its place and straightened his hat.

"I'll make a sledge," he said to himself.

A sledge. . . . It's a wonderful thing, is a sledge. You spread out a rug to make it cosy, show the horses that you haven't forgotten the whip and off you go, so fast that the sun can hardly keep up with you. And you stop worrying about your years because once again you can meet the old friends whom time has begun to rob you of, and the trail you've blazed in the early snow brings many a man to his village and home.

What makes a man feel like a real man again is a sledge. Just make him a sledge that will prompt him to call you *bade** even if you aren't any older than he is, a sledge that will long for the road and make the road long for it.

* A term of respect used by Moldavian peasants in addressing an elder.—*Tr.*

Yes, a sledge is a wonderful thing.

His wife, seeing him deep in thought, with the axe under his arm, asked him to cut some chips, for fear that the axe might get rusty. Then it was a slightly longer poker she wanted, then a pail of water, and the old man found himself doing the usual chores. And so it went on, with sunshine one day and rain the next; one by one the days flew by, as if somebody were stealing them.

The old man used to get up before dawn—he liked to put on his clothes in the dark, light his pipe with an ember still glowing in the stove from the night before and go out for a look round, to see if anyone was ravaging the neighbours' orchards while they slept. By sunrise he had shifted the axe to his left hand. And for days on end he could be seen pottering about the yard, with the pipe gone out in his mouth. He seemed to have forgotten all about walnut and sledge. Finally, late in the afternoon, he would discover the matches in his pocket; then he would drive the axe into a stump and fall into a reverie.

As the days went on he could be seen more and more often standing in the middle of the yard, peering over the roof of the shed, as if that year's spring had come back and he expected the storks to show up.

But that didn't last long. The old woman, noticing that the axe-blade had lost its sheen, nagged him in a deliberately loud voice so that the passers-by could hear. He put her kerchief right to soothe her, shouldered the axe and turned to face the house. For once he did not examine the walnut. He tapped the trunk with the axe-butt and muttered, "I'll make a sledge."

So he had made up his mind. And when he set his mind on a thing it was as good as done. True, he did it seldom—he was leisurely by habit and never in his life had he taken three steps where two were enough.

Suppose the grapes had begun to ripen. The first to vanish from the village were the children—you saw them once in three days, with their lips coloured blue. Then the young fellows lost their way home and roamed the roads till well after midnight, singing at the top of their voices. Lastly the old men began to recall the year they had fought the Austrians. And they became so talkative that there was no getting away from them once they had laid hold of you.

Old Mihail, too, had a few vines at the far end of the yard, but they didn't seem to worry him, as if it were elder-berries that were ripe and not grapes. His wife, however, kept pestering him.

"What about the grapes, Mihalutsa?"

He made no reply for a while—he seemed to plane the words and line them up, not uttering them until he was sure they fitted together.

"What about them? Let them ripen first."

The fields turned bare as the autumn advanced, there was nothing left on the vines but leaves—the children had taken care of the solitary grapes that you might have seen here and there the day before.

Mihail's vines were the only ones still heavy with fruit. The grapes had begun to shrivel; they dropped one by one and, to save them, he brought a sackful of burdock leaves and spread them out under the vines. A few more days and there were scarcely any grapes left in the clusters—most of the grapes had fallen. And when the hoarfrost began to strip the vines of leaves, Mihail walked into the house, gazed at his wife as if trying to guess how many kerchiefs she had on, and finally said, "I suppose it's time we picked those grapes."

When they had brought them in he shut himself up in the shed, and for two or three weeks the old woman

became a grass-widow. But with the very first snow-flakes you found him at work in the other half of the shed, and because his well-aimed blows were few and far between, the hens in the neighbourhood could neither sleep properly nor quite wake up.

One day in mid-winter he would go out bare-headed to the house gate and stop the first man who happened to be passing.

"Will you do me a favour? I've just tapped some wine, so if it isn't asking too much—"

If it wasn't asking too much! The lucky fellow would be so overjoyed that he would forget to wipe his boots at the doorstep, and his breath would catch as he heard the jug gurgle and saw the clear wine pour into the glass, almost faster than he could toss it down.

Small wonder that there wasn't a wedding in the village to which old Mihail wasn't invited, a neighbour who didn't raise his cap as he walked past the house, nor a toper who didn't prop up his gate-post till spring.

And so, the old man had set his mind on making a sledge.

He kept gazing at the top of the walnut-tree for about a week, wondering what its roots were like, and even prodded the ground with a spade to see if he had guessed right. Then, one day, when he found the soup more savoury than usual, he said to his wife, "You know, I'm going to uproot the walnut and make a sledge."

It was his good fortune to have married a quick-witted woman—she took the hint at once.

"By all means! Look at my jacket, it's ripped under the arms—we'll sell the sledge and I'll make myself a new jacket."

Old Mihail smiled, he knew all about foolishness, having heard enough of it in his life.

"Funny, is it? Do you want me to become the laughing-stock of the village? Do you want the children to jeer at me?"

"You can wear my leather jacket."

He gave her his boots, his waistcoat, his scarf, but when it came to his cap he dug up the walnut. Not that he was sorry to part with his cap, but it was late autumn and the tree was now dry enough. He lopped off crown and roots and rolled the trunk into the shed to shelter it from the rain.

And day after day, whether covering up the vines for the winter or repairing the fence, he kept thinking of the sledge. From time to time he screwed up his eyes and fancied he saw something light, swift and beautiful, something he had dreamed of when, a boy of eight, he had first picked up an axe. All his life—whether making a rolling-pin, a footstool or staves for a cask—he had seen in his mind's eye that light, swift and beautiful something.

It was only now, in ripe old age, that he knew it had been a sledge. But not one of those that litter the road with straw in winter and cannot afford shade even to a dog in summer. His sledge was to be of a kind that had never existed on earth, a kind that it took away the old man's breath to just think about it.

When the severe winter frosts were over and he could go out with only a padded jacket on, he went to the shed, gave the walnut a couple of blows with the butt of the axe and listened to the sound. Seeing him near the trunk, axe in hand, his wife rushed out of the house.

"Are you working on it, Mihalutsa?"

He turned and replaced the axe. As the old woman stood uncertainly in the middle of the yard, he said, "It isn't dry enough yet."

He thought he was in for another nagging, but he got off easy this time. However, when he looked for his boots he couldn't find them under the bench where he had left them. His wife was nowhere to be seen, either. Well, he didn't mind if she had taken the boots. Hadn't he given them to her himself?

He worked in the house all day, making a cask. Occasionally, as he planed quietly, his face creased in a smile. In his mind's eye he saw the sledge, and what a sledge! It wasn't a dream, either, for there was the walnut lying in the yard. How many trees like that were wasted! And yet there he was, sitting in the house planing staves for a cask so that his old woman shouldn't starve. But it wouldn't be much longer now—a day or two at most—before he got down to real work. And once you had set your eyes on the sledge you wouldn't be able to take them off it, and wouldn't believe it when they told you what it was made of. Yes, the old man was still going strong—many an axe would grow blunt in his hands before he was through.

Spring was slow in coming, as if it had gone astray. But somebody must have shown it the way at last, for come it did after all, and Mihail was glad because they had both weathered the winter—he and the sledge. During the summer he shifted the walnut from place to place five or six times; when the sun was shining he rolled it over to the front of the house where there was no shade, and when the sky was overcast he took it to the far end of the yard where the breeze could get at it. He already knew its every knot and bulge, and at night, lying on the cot between the two pear-trees, he planed it in his mind. He kept planing it till the last dog fell asleep in the village, till the last bird returned to its nest, till the maize could be heard rustling far away in the field. Then he began to put the sledge

together, and towards daybreak he already imagined he saw it beside him, complete with runners, a sledge that was eager to slide out into the wide world; he visualized its white virgin body and heard the wind singing in its wooden frame.

His eyes half-closed, he dreamed of a swift sledge that would speed across the countryside, along many roads, making people stop to look at it. He and his wife might be dead, but the sledge would go on racing along the roads; many a man would tumble his wife out of it, many a girl would drive away in it never to come back to her parents, and perhaps some old man would recall as he pulled his cap over his ears that the sledge had been made by Mihail, and say a kind word about him.

In autumn, when there was less work to do outdoors, the old woman nagged him every day.

"But don't you see it isn't dry enough yet? Can't you understand simple language?"

"I don't care how you make money, I need a pair of red boots."

"You can wear mine."

"Yours aren't red."

The old man smiled—the foolish things a person can say when he uses his tongue instead of his brains! But his wife wanted those boots and when she saw that winter was knocking at the gate and he hadn't yet started on the sledge, she gave him warning.

"Look here, if you don't make that sledge before the New Year I'll leave you. I'll get a divorce."

She was trying to frighten him but he wasn't to be frightened—had she not been threatening to leave him for the last forty years?

When the first snow fell Mihail stood the walnut by the gate and went to the shed to get the tools ready. He repaired the adze, the chisels and the plane-iron,

made a new plane-stock and whetted the blades so that they could split a hair. Then he hauled the walnut into the shed as he had meant to do.

The old woman looked in every evening to see what he had done, and upon finding the trunk untouched she cooked him a soup that stuck in his throat.

By the New Year Mihail had got no further than cutting the walnut in two. He had not even started on the runners when Ifteni, a tiny fellow with plenty of money and conceit, came along.

"Making a sledge, are you?"

"Yes."

"What'll your price be?"

"Let me finish it first."

"Do you think you'll have the shaft ready, say, two weeks from now?"

Mihail gazed at the man, trying to guess how many glasses he had downed.

"You'll drink a lot of wine before the shaft's ready."

"That's all right, but winter will soon be over. What good will your sledge be in May? It won't fetch you a bunch of onions."

Mihail smiled—lucky is the man who can hold his tongue.

By the time the blizzards came the old man had barely finished the runners; but they were runners such as the villagers had never seen—light, smooth and so bright that you could have shaved looking in them.

Ifteni spent the day propping up the walls of the shed. He was ready to pay any price the old man named for the runners—everything else, he said, he would order from another joiner. But the old man already visualized his sledge. All his life he had planed wood, his joints had become hard and stiff and new flesh had grown a dozen times on each of his fingers, but now at last

he was making that sledge. He could see the horses harnessed to it, and faces smiling at the wind, and he laughed at Ifteni jingling the money in his pockets.

But of course there was more to a sledge than a pair of runners. After them came the four uprights, so neat that the neighbours' children played with them, and two side-bars of ashwood, slightly curved, and nobody but he knew that it was those two curved pieces that would give the sledge its fleetness.

There wasn't much more to do, but the nearer he came to finishing his wonder-work, the more the old woman harassed him. And to spare both of them he knocked together a cot in the shed, where he also had a small stove, and nobody saw him for days on end. Early in the morning he would lock himself in, take a piece of wood and remain all alone with his sledge. Calm and confident, he spent day after day at the bench, polishing the wood, talking quietly to the sledge and occasionally humming an old melody. There was no one and nothing on earth but he and the sledge, and he was performing man's greatest ritual—the ritual of labour. And late at night he would hold up to the lamp the finished piece of wood, and the past day would seem to him as beautiful as the shining wood in his hand.

He lost count of the days. He went to bed only when his palms were numb, and the moment he awoke he again picked up the wood lying on the bench. Never in his life as a joiner had the shavings flown so fast. And when the snow began to melt, when at noon you could hear the drops falling from the roof, he started counting the days on his fingers, looking forward to the time when he could turn over the adze and use its butt to hammer the sledge together.

There was very little left to do when one day his wife tapped at the door. He unlocked it. A chestnut horse harnessed to a hand sledge stood on the road, and a woman was busy loading the sledge with bundles which she carried from the house.

"I'm leaving," his wife said.

He didn't understand.

"All right," he said, examining a piece of wood. "Mind you don't lose the key."

But she lingered.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm leaving for good. I'm going to live with my sister."

The wood slipped from the old man's hand. He walked over to the threshold and gazed into the face that he had seen every day for the last forty years. Life would be so empty without that face and without those hands. Then he glanced at the parts of the sledge, which shone on the bench, as brightly as ever. It was waiting for him. His life would be empty without the old woman, but without the sledge there wouldn't be any life at all.

"I'll finish it in a couple of days," he said softly, in the tone he had used to tell his sorrows to the sledge.

"I'm leaving just the same."

He didn't do any more work that day. Next morning he rose earlier than usual, and the day after he was planing away by lamplight, as if nothing had happened. Only at midday did it occur to him that he was now a grass-widower.

"Oh, well!"

That winter passed too, and grass sprouted where the soil in the yard was not beaten too hard. And the day came when Mihail took the parts outside and began to assemble the sledge. He worked as in a

daze. Every now and again, as his mouth went dry, he took a sip of wine from a little jug, and then the adze clanked again as it pieced the sledge together.

First he joined the uprights to the runners, then came the cross-pieces and the body. He tried not to look at his work as a whole, reserving that for the last moment.

By midday the sledge was ready. He swept up the shavings, took the tools back to the shed and put them in their places. Then, lighting his pipe, he stepped out, leaned against the door-post and gazed at the sledge. It was a wonderfully shapely sledge that stood in the yard; and the sun was bathing in its body and it shone as if one more drop of light had fallen on the earth.

"A splendid sledge, blast it!"

He sat down on the doorstep—his age was telling at last and it was no longer easy to stand up. He swept the yard with his gaze—it was empty and neglected. The boughs of the apple-tree that grew near the fence were broken here and there, no one had bothered to prop them and now it was too late. The cat had scrambled out of the house through the chimney; black with soot and hungry, it was running to and fro on the roof, mewing at passers-by.

The old man rose slowly to go back to work. People passing by stopped for a moment at his gate.

"What's that?"

"A sledge. And what a sledge!"

"Not bad, but who wants it at this time of year?"

Mihail smiled—that poor chap was blind to beauty and had missed a lot in life. He tucked under his cap a strand of grey hair sticky with sweat, and went to work.

Towards evening he piled the dead leaves he had swept up in the yard and set fire to them. Once again, as he poked the fire with a rod, bending one knee, he saw in his mind's eye that white, swift and beautiful something. Thrills ran down his back. He sank down.

"Why, it wasn't a sledge!"

And once again he felt young and strong, stronger than he had been even at twenty-five. He smiled and kept poking the fire as he chose words and lined them up.

"If it wasn't a sledge," he said at last, "it must have been a cart! A cart is a wonderful thing."

The cart he had in mind was to be one that had never been seen on earth.

When the leaves had burned out, he rose and went indoors.

"The old woman's sure to come back—if only she hasn't married another man."

NIKOLAE ANTON AND HIS SIX SONS

It was autumn. From his yard Nikolae Anton could see his neighbours' houses, which had been hidden in their orchards throughout the summer. New bars had been provided round the well for the gossips to sit on as they exchanged news, and those who had marriageable daughters had chained their dogs in the back yard.

Standing in the middle of his yard, Nikolae Anton rolled a cigarette. Then, gingerly putting its tip in a corner of his mouth, he lighted it and started on a round of the farm to see whatever needed attention before the winter set in. Near the cellar he picked up a bit of rope and tied it round the pot-rack—it might come in handy. He then uprooted an acacia shoot that stuck up crazily among the pear-trees. Then he saw

that the fence at the far end of the yard had sagged a bit to the road. He walked over to it and shook the slightly rotten post. He fetched a new post and a blacksmith's hammer from the shed. Then he took the cigarette out of his mouth for a moment.

"Oh, boys!"

Two of them popped out of the house, a third stepped down from the garret, a fourth came up from the cellar and two more emerged from nowhere, and before Nikolae Anton could replace his cigarette in the corner of his mouth he was surrounded by six strapping boys that might have been six young oaks. A little surprised, Nikolae Anton looked at the grove—now that they had grown up he always had the impression when he saw them together that there were actually more of them. But no, there were just six.

"Come on, boys, let's drive in this post. The old one's rotten and the fence is falling down."

He put the new post in position and handed the hammer to the eldest.

"Here, show the others how to drive in a post."

The youngest couldn't help teasing his father.

"Hadn't you better do it yourself, Dad? You know how it's done."

Nikolae Anton thrust his hand into his pocket.

"No. I'll do it later."

As soon as the eldest had had two goes the one next to him took the hammer.

"Stand back, you, let me show you how to use a hammer!"

While they kept it up, each striking two blows to show the others the way to do it, Nikolae Anton rushed to the shed for nails. He came running back in no time, shouting from afar, "Hold on, you brats! You've driven that post all in!"

But the youngest had just got hold of the hammer and while Nikolae Anton took the others to task he added two more blows, driving the post down to the middle of the fence. Nikolae Anton was beside himself with fury.

"Now tell me what I'm going to nail the two upper boards to!"

Six pairs of eyes turned on the two upper boards and the next moment six opinions were offered.

"Let's drive in another post."

"What for? Better make this one longer."

"Why not take off the upper boards?"

"Let's make a new fence, Dad."

"Wait, I'll pull this one out."

Nikolae Anton lost his temper.

"Shut up, all of you! You brats. Leave the fence alone and get about your own business. I'll take care of it myself."

The lads went. Nikolae Anton did some tying here, drove in a nail there, so that the fence would hold at least till spring. Then he rolled another cigarette, put it in the corner of his mouth and resumed his round of the yard to see what else needed attention before the winter.

In the afternoon his neighbour, Kostakel, dropped in.

"Won't you lend me a hand, *bade* Anton? I'm in trouble."

"What's the matter?"

"My shed's tumbling down. It may come down in a heap any moment now. The rain must have rotted it, or perhaps my mother-in-law didn't have it built properly."

Between the bare trees Nikolae Anton cast a glance at Kostakel's little shed, then took the cigarette out of his mouth.

"Oh, boys!"

Two of them popped out of the house, a third cleared the neighbour's fence, a fourth emerged from the shed and two more came from nowhere, and again Nikolae Anton stared at them—were there really no more than six?

"Come along to Kostakel's."

Kostakel's shed was looking squarely down at the road, as if choosing the best spot to topple down on. Each of the boys got himself a pole from under the shed. The youngest couldn't help teasing his father.

"There's another pole left, Dad."

"Let it stay there, it's too thin."

The boys rolled up their sleeves—six poles thrust into the sides of the shed, six pairs of shoulders moved up, six commands rang out:

"Now!"

"One!"

"Heave!"

"Up!"

"Here we go!"

"Come on!"

Nikolae Anton was furious.

"Shut up! I'm giving orders here. You just lift it. Wait for me. One!"

Creaking slightly, the shed stood upright. Nikolae Anton looked round for a wood-block to prop it with, but before he could pick up one the shed, creaking slightly, tilted to the other side.

"Hey, stop, you'll tip it the other way!"

But the boys were too excited to heed him and to rescue his neighbour's shed Nikolae Anton said to him, "Who's that girl on the road?"

And he made haste to use the wood-block, for the next moment the six poles were down and his six young

oaks were staring about them, searching for the girl.

Towards sundown Nikolae Anton was brought a receipt for the meat he had delivered to the state. He took the cigarette out of the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, boys!"

And again he looked about him in surprise—were there really no more than six of them?

"What does this paper say?"

The eldest began to read.

"'Receipt. Number one thousand—'"

"Wait, that isn't the place to start from. 'Ministry of Agricultural Stocks—'"

"Come on, stop fooling. 'Receipt. To Nikolae Anton—'"

"You mean 'Anton Gavrilovich'? Read it properly once you've started."

"It's for twenty kilogrammes, Father."

"What are you talking about! We still have to deliver twenty!"

Smiling, Nikolae Anton took the receipt away.

"You rogues! I'll go to Kostakel's and ask him to read it for me. Come along, your mother's calling us to dinner."

And when they were all seated at table, it was a pity the bride and bridegroom were missing, for it could have been a regular wedding-feast. Nikolae Anton sliced two loaves, and the mistress of the house ladled out the soup, cooked in two pots. After the soup the boys ate up a goose and drank a pailful of water.

The meal over, Nikolae Anton stretched out on his side to rest and confer with the boys.

"What do you say to adding a pent-house to the shed?"

Six pairs of eyes turned on him and six suggestions were made.

"I think we should build two pent-houses."

"What for? Let's build a long one behind the shed."

"The idea! There's the fence behind the shed."

"Let's build it in front of the shed."

"Dad, why not raise the roof of the shed?"

"Let's do that, but let's also shift the shed nearer to the road."

Nikolae Anton jumped up from the couch.

"Shut up—do you want to pull down the shed? I won't build any pent-house."

Then the youngest placed himself quietly beside him and handed him the matches which had slipped out of his pocket.

"I'd like to go for a walk, Father."

The one who was a bit bigger cut in.

"Not so fast. There are bigger people here than you."

"Would you be the bigger one?"

"Leave that cap alone—I'm going too."*

Nikolae Anton gazed at them.

"All right, be off with you. But look here, boys. You must be together at the gate, because I won't come out six times to let you in one at a time."

When the boys had left Nikolae Anton climbed on to the stove ledge. His wife sat knitting close by, with a sieveful of mittens. She had been knitting those mittens for some three weeks and still seemed as far from finishing them as ever.

Nikolae Anton picked up a pair and eyed them critically.

"Are these for Alisandru?"

"Yes."

* This is said by the eldest son, whose cap is preferred by the others, being much finer and likely to make a bigger impression on the girls.—*Tr.*

"Fine mittens. You should mark them so that the lads won't mix 'em up."

He reclined on a cushion and twirled his right moustache.

"If you only knew how tired I get, running about with those brats all day!"

"I know! Six of them—"

Nikolae Anton began to twirl the tip of his left moustache.

"But I won't give in to them any longer. One of these days I'll give them a sound hiding."

The poor woman froze with amazement. Her knitting fell into her lap.

"Good Lord, Anton, why do you say that? They are good boys and none of them ever crosses you."

Nikolae Anton left his moustache alone and lazily patted his pocket, feeling for the tobacco.

"Well, anyway, I'll see."

Translated by S. Apresyan



OLES GONCHAR

Ukrainian Author

"Our aim is not to have isolated flowering spots, but to make our Soviet Land into one great garden, flooded with colour and light"—so says one of Oles Gonchar's heroes, and these words would make a good epigraph to all his works.

Oles Gonchar, born in 1918, was a student at the Faculty of Literature when the Great Patriotic War broke out; he gave up his studies and signed up for the army. Most of his works—the trilogy *Standard-Bearers* comprising *Alps* (1916), *The Blue Danube* and *Zlatá Praha* (1917-18), as well as his novel *The Land Drones* (1917) and his short stories, are based on his front-line impressions. And though the subject of these stories is war, they are imbued with an amazing spirit of optimism, of eagerness for a peaceful life.

This is what Oles Gonchar writes about his post-war plans which he is carrying out now:

"For the last few years I have been watching keenly the happenings in the south of the Ukraine. I have taken this country, which was a thinly populated, arid steppe called Tavria in the old days, as the subject of my next work. I plan to write an epic novel of several volumes embracing Tavria's past and the events I am witnessing there now." The two first volumes—*Tavria* and *Perekop* have already come out.

SKYLARK

I

Hosts and hosts of birds came to the treeless southern steppe in the autumn. Here, for the last time before setting out on their long flight across the seas, they fed and rested. Every cottage had its feathered lodgers, and the children caught the plump, lazy quails almost with their bare hands.

Now the birds were on their way back from beyond the seas, lean, light and nimble. They chirped all along the shore-line, hopped about in the steppe and under the windows of the Solonchany Machine and Tractor Station without fear of man or motor, seeking to still their spring hunger in these familiar surroundings.

The warbling of the feathered tribe awakened Zoya. Father's cap, she noticed, was not on the nail. The bird fair was in full chatter beneath her window, the yard was a medley of noises, and people were hurrying back and forth. Tractors stood lined up by the workshops, facing the steppe, and the MTS people had turned out in full force for the traditional spring opening.

"They're starting out! What about me?" Zoya thought in a panic. She jumped out of bed and dressed quickly. Her hair, washed the night before, smelled faintly of strawberry soap. Zoya wound it into a firm

dark knot. It seemed but yesterday that she had been plaiting braids in two loops like a little girl, but this spring she had begun to follow the style of the grown-up girls. She wore high-heeled shoes, too, although tall enough without them, and as slim and supple as a young birch-tree.

Putting on her shoes she stretched her leg out, stamped her foot on the floor, and laughed. It was a firm, straight, pretty, girlish leg.

The leading tractors had started when Zoya rushed outdoors. Today the drivers were clutching the wheel with a special swagger. Karp Vasilyevich Lisogor, Zoya's father and manager of the MTS, strode up and down the line of tractors with his deputy, giving final orders to the team-leaders. Excited and anxious, he did not see his daughter. It seemed that the men setting out for the steppe were nearer and dearer to him this minute than she. As she passed him he shouted to them over her head:

"Best of luck!"

Zoya longed to be up there in the driver's seat, to step on the pedals and rumble out into the steppe, into the bright spring expanses. The sky out there was blue, bracing and high—higher than usual. The earth, awakening from its winter sleep, gave off intoxicating scents and the birds hovering above tried out their voices.

Why couldn't she, Zoya, sit at the tractor wheel in her overalls, like Oksana Boiko, the renowned driver? Then Father would be sure to wish her success, too, and Savva Grek, the handsome mechanic, would come flouncing after her, just as he was flouncing round Oksana this very minute.

"Let me drive a bit, Oksana," Zoya pleaded, "just to the gates."

"No, my girl, this isn't turning knobs on the radio! This iron steed of mine is techy: it might drive you, instead of you driving it."

"I can manage," said Zoya. "I've had a go before, haven't I?"

"You might lose control!"

"In any case, Karp Vasilyevich is looking this way," Savva, the mechanic, cut in, winking to Oksana. "For all we know, he might give Oksana a reprimand!"

They laughed, and Zoya, confused and cut up, blushed scarlet.

"I know how you feel, Zoya," Oksana said sympathetically, "when I was fifteen I used to see tractors in my dreams every night!"

"Not fifteen—seventeen!" Zoya wanted to shout back, so that Oksana should know and not put on airs; so that Savva should know, too.

But Father was near by.

He strode up to Oksana's tractor, tapped its mud-guard gently, and said:

"An old crock! Used to cross the Don on its own steam.... D'you think it'll see the season through, Oksana?"

"Definitely, Karp Vasilyevich, and not just this season alone. Appearances are deceptive; it has a youthful temperament," Oksana replied.

"Youthful, did you say?" the manager grinned.

Catching sight of his daughter he cast a surprised, strangely unfamiliar glance at her. Zoya, feeling hot and flustered, retreated hastily into the crowd of on-lookers.

She hid herself behind the grease-stained overalls of the mechanics, and listened. She didn't like Oksana and Father exchanging jokes and found their amiable conversation disagreeable. What was most unpleasant was the way Oksana laughed and flirted, tossing her

golden curls. For a second Zoya fancied what it would be like if Father were to bring Oksana into their home, if she were to become Zoya's—

No, Zoya would not care to have her for a step-mother.

II

Fresh tracks stretched from the MTS to the neighbouring collective farms. The tractors had gone, the yard was empty and spacious. The morning air rang with the velvety rumble of distant motors. Smoke curled on the horizon above the trailers—the steppe dwellings of the tractor crews with their light-blue curtains in the windows, and the slender antennae rising into the sky, delicate and sensitive.

There were seventeen of these trailers in the field, far apart and barely visible in the cut-glass haze of the steppe, their wheels sunk into the soil of the collective farms serviced by the Solonchany MTS. The country was flat, having once been the bottom of the sea. From the watch-tower the sea itself could be seen in the south, level with the land, even higher.

Seventeen trailers—seventeen antennae, and all of them listening at their far-flung posts to field headquarters.

The cluster of buildings which made up the machine and tractor station stood in the middle of the steppe and was visible for miles. The fascists destroyed the MTS when they retreated, but it had been restored and roofed with speckled tiles—workshops, dwellings, office and garage.... A bit away were the fuel stores—white tanks dug deep into the ground.

In winter the yard was packed with machines, fires burnt in the forges all day, machines hummed and the neglected book-keepers pined away in office corners, surrendering their desks to the imperious people of

the steppe. Conferences, seminars and study courses for farm mechanics were in full swing.

Zoya's transmitter was installed in the building next to the manager's office. Zoya was the radio operator. It was to her that the seventeen trailer antennae listened with their sensitive tips. Maintaining radio contact with the field-teams kept Zoya in the mainstream of all the flaming passions of men carried away by their toil—team-leaders, mechanics, and checkers. She was the first to take their messages; hers was the first voice that they heard.

In the spring, when the tractors were busy day and night, Zoya's part in the game increased. She found unending delight in her work, which knit her to the collective she loved and which was her sure support in life.

Zoya became particularly friendly with the MTS people during the war. That school of friendship and the severe trials experienced as a child served her in good stead now that she had fully feathered, as the MTS watchman put it.

There was that far-away war-time summer when the Solonchany MTS moved east with all its tractors and machines. Zoya would remember it to her dying day.

The southern steppe had been in the grip of a dry, suffocating heat; the children wept in the shacks, and spotters constantly warned of approaching enemy aircraft.

Day after day they rumbled along the dusty highway.

They were short of drivers, many of whom had been called to the army or had joined the partisans, but not a single tractor was left behind. Karp Vasilyevich mobilized the drivers' families—women and all. He put

his own wife in the driver's seat, told her what to do and started the motor.

"Drive!" he commanded.

Zoya bounced up and down by her mother's side. The vehicles were strung out over miles of road. Scores of powerful tractors, dust-covered combines, multiple ploughs and threshers, workshops, trailers with the paint peeling—all had been put on wheels, everything travelled according to the strict itinerary marked off on the map which Lisogor, a veteran Communist, kept in his breast pocket.

Zoya had little chance to speak to her father during the march. But with the keen insight of a child she was conscious of his everyday greatness, his unbending will-power.

He was the soul of the column, its inspired leader. His battered roadster hustled up and down night and day, taking him from one end of the column to the other. He took in things at a glance and divined the innermost thoughts and intentions of his subordinates long before they had matured in their own minds. He brought cheer to the exhausted, restrained the overzealous, and imparted his will, his deliberate tempo and calculated rhythm, to the pulsating life of the march.

Hurrying past their tractor he threw a quick glance at wife and daughter. Unshaven, lean and covered with grime, he followed them intently with his eyes, threw a curt, almost rough "Keep your distance!" at them, and was off.

On one occasion the column got caught in quicksands. They had to lay a road through several miles of it; they cut scrub, hauled it to the road and placed it under the tractors and combines. Zoya worked alongside the grown-ups.

Although they were in strange places and unfamiliar surroundings, Karp Vasilyevich acted as one who was part proprietor. Zoya recalled how they came to a large railway station that had just been bombed by the enemy. It was an ugly sight: the lines were chock-a-block with trains, there were bomb craters everywhere and fires were raging. Shells were exploding and the numerous gasoline tanks could burst into flames any moment.

Some of the column panicked: let's get out of it, they pleaded, let's make a detour and get away from this hell! In any case, what had this out-of-the-way station to do with Karp Lisogor? He could afford to bypass it and refuel elsewhere. But no! Lisogor summoned all Communist Party and Komsomol members, and took them into the inferno where everything was twisted, crackling and breathing fire. Their powerful tractors hauled freight cars and gasoline tanks out of reach of the fire.

How Zoya had wished she were a grown-up, and like Father!

Then came the snows. The severe winter made things even more difficult. But there, away on the other bank of the Don, where the MTS had pitched camp, its people prepared for the sowing just as if they were home in Solonchany. The workshops were too small, they had to work outdoors in the severe frost, and often Mother left the skin of her fingers on the grey, cold metal. They slept in the cold, unheated trailers, and in the mornings Mother's hair would be frozen to the wall.

They had been in the front-line trenches; as Zoya put it, it was in the front lines across the Don, that she lost her mother.

The homeward journey to the Ukraine was made by railway. Every item was brought back, nothing was

left behind or lost. Even the faded trailers were securely mounted on freight cars. The war was still raging, but the army commandants gave the green light to the peaceful Solonchany train.

Oksana Boiko had taken part in the march; she had been a friend of Zoya's mother. Zoya still recalled what this friendship had meant to Oksana, when her husband, a tractor-driver, disappeared beneath the ice at one of the river crossings.

Neither Zoya nor Oksana had ever dreamed that the day would come when this Savva, this handsome black-browed youth, would come on the scene and sow seeds of strife between them.

III

"I wonder if people will be jealous in communist society," Zoya pondered, as she pored over the sheets of a correspondence-course lecture in the radio-room. "Will the discords of human emotion ever cease, will everybody live and work without upsets?"

It had always been her belief that low passions such as jealousy, envy and vanity could be overcome, provided one made the effort.

But that was before she experienced them herself. And now came the bitter, humiliating realization. Her unclouded relations with people were giving way to emotions of a different sort.

"Our little lark is as happy as the day is long!" the tractor-drivers used to say about Zoya. Indeed, they had become used to her just as they had become used to the lark that warbled above their heads all during the spring. And they reacted to her in the same way as they did to the feathered herald of spring—with tender admiration, good nature, and complete confidence. These weather-beaten men of the steppe knew that the

dispatcher would never let them down, that communications would always be in perfect order, that Zoya would never complain about the language which occasionally reached her radio-room from the field-sets. It was taken for granted that Zoya would forgive—she was to them what the field nurse was to front-line soldiers.

And Zoya forgave.

The men in every field-team were sure that Zoya was *their* fan, that she rejoiced at their success. Ok-sana Boiko knew this too. But would things be the same now? Could it be that something strange and insincere had entered Zoya's radio-room?

Zoya had the reputation of being everybody's well-wisher.

During the season she was always the first to know what was on the minds of the men away in the fields. Their joys and passions came to her first-hand through the earphones of her receiver. Joy always came fresh, hot and unbridled, doubt and worry was expressed bluntly, and the rebukes were sharp and unsparing.

She had to listen to everything, even to the things that hurt her girlish senses, yet she remembered only the points that mattered; the rest she discarded.

And so it was now. After patiently listening to a long oration by Palivoda she ignored the redundant and made a brief and precise entry in her log. Palivoda's tractor has had a break-down, caused by ... he has done ... to straighten it out. She looked at herself in the mirror, and, leaving the radio-room, headed across the yard for the garage.

She was in a gay mood, her full lips twitched, keeping back a smile. She cocked her head slightly to one side as usual, and straightened her rose-coloured kerchief. Her face was soft and tender as a child's, and

there was something unconsciously feminine in her lissom figure girdled with a narrow belt.

The Stormy Petrel—their emergency repairs lorry—was in readiness outside the garage. It was well equipped, and had a radio like the trailers. Savva, the mechanic, was in charge of it.

Savva grinned and saluted. He was wearing an officer's riding-breeches and a blue slip-on—slim and tanned as the devil himself, and mischievous imps gambolling in his sparkling eyes.

"Greetings to the skylark! What is the order of the day?" he said cheerfully.

Zoya gazed at him from under her kerchief with wide-open eyes. There was surprise in her look, her eyes moistened and shone with unusual brilliance.

"Palivoda has had a break-down. The NAT is out," she told him.

"Palivoda again?! When are you going to send me to Oksana's?"

"Don't worry; you'll be sent whenever you're needed. But it isn't often that she needs help, is it?"

"Worse luck!" he said.

"On the contrary!" she parried.

Told about Palivoda's needs and cursing him amiably, Savva ran to the workshop to get the spare parts.

Zoya had done her job, but something rooted her to the spot. She had told Savva she would send him to Oksana if she needed help.... But would she? It wouldn't be easy, but—

Returning to his lorry, Savva, half in earnest, tried to embrace her with his free hand.

"Fine little bride growing up for someone!"

Zoya evaded him and slapped him lightly on his hot, firm back.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Savva." And stood there as if waiting for something.

The Stormy Petrel started off, gathered speed and plunged into the steppe. A fine dust rose in its wake. Only the day before there had been no dust. But the wind quickly dried the soil. Rain was needed urgently.

Zoya pensively followed the lorry with her eyes. The cloud of dust in its wake was far away in the steppe. Now it turned, vanishing behind the green wall of the forest shelter belt.

Although out of sight, Savva was not out of Zoya's mind. Her girlish imagination painted a vivid portrait of him, stepping lightly by Palivoda's side across the furrows, the swallows flirting with him. Then night fell, and he was in another team, perhaps Oksana's, stretched out under a tractor, working skilfully, spectacularly, his face lit up by the torches.

When would he be back? If by evening, he would probably come out into the yard with his full-throated concertina. But it all depended on her, Zoya, whether he would return or not. Perhaps she would have to contact him out there in the steppe and send him from Palivoda's to another team, order him to get there as quickly as possible without returning to the MTS.

And she would have to do it—in spite of everything.

He had behaved in a strange way. "Fine little bride ... for someone!"

"For someone, dear Savva?—I would rather it were for you!"

The heat was sweltering and the steppe simmered in the blinding haze. The clear sky, telegraph wires strung across it, stretched far, far away, like an immense light-blue sheet of music, with the starlings perching on the wires higher and lower, looking much like the first, petrified sounds of a symphony.

IV

Rainless days came and went. Rain had fallen in the vicinity, but bypassed the Solonchany MTS.

Karp Vasilyevich came home looking gloomier every day. Usually he wore his cap on the back of his head, his face cheery, but now it was pulled down over his eyes and was covered with a layer of dust—letters could be traced on it.

Zoya had heard her father upbraiding a visiting assistant professor from the institute of mechanization.

"Why are you wasting time on trifles?" he roared. "Why don't you break the clouds for us? It's about time!"

The assistant professor, who was objecting, mumbled something in reply.

"That's not true, the time *is* ripe!" her father boomed back. "It is possible to control the movement of air currents. How much longer shall we have to put up with this anarchy in nature?"

Savva's concertina was silent in the evenings. If he was not away in the fields he would come to the office looking glum, nervy and unapproachable. He would station himself in the doorway, lean against the door and from this vantage point stare at the barometer on the wall between the windows.

"Take it down!" he would rumble threateningly. "Or I'll smash it against your heads!"

The instrument behaved disgracefully. While everything was wilting under the scorching sun, the barometer indicated rain three days in succession.

All took the general distress to heart, each in his own way.

Every morning, throwing open the radio-room window, Zoya peered into the steppe but saw nothing encouraging. Things were getting worse. The steppe was

losing its gay hues. Faded, copper-coloured patches replaced its verdure. The air was dry and there was no dew, not even at dawn.

Not the sun alone, but the entire sky radiated heat. Wilting, losing its blue, it broiled overhead—heavy, bleak, remorseless. Along the edge of its enormous dome hovered dirt-coloured walls of dust, the forerunners of distant, ominous storms.

The tractor-drivers spoke to Zoya listlessly from their trailers. She sat amid her equipment, among the dust-covered flowers and books that she had flung away without reading, sat alert, as though expecting something to happen any moment. At times she thought she heard the distant growl of thunder, and darted to the window. But the horizon, as before, was revoltingly bare.

When contacting any of the teams the first thing she did was to ask about the wheat. This did not surprise anyone. The little MTS radio operator sitting in her tiny booth was not paid by workdays, she neither ploughed nor sowed, but— The tractor-drivers always took her questions seriously, although they knew she would not use their information in any bulletin.

The news was cheerless.

"The soil is cracking in places," they told her.

"The tractors are sick of it, you can almost hear them groan," others said.

Time and again the outlying teams contacted Zoya themselves, wanting to know if the sky was overcast anywhere, whether clouds had appeared over the MTS. What could she say to them?

Oksana's team worked in one of the remoter collective farms. They demanded meteorological reports morning and evening.

Their demand was sharp, insistent, irritated.

Father, who had just returned from a meeting of the District Party Committee, was having his evening meal. Zoya stood by the open window. The stars on the horizon winked and glimmered as though they were alive. The pale white of the flowering acacias spread under the window. The air was saturated with their fragrance.

They had been planted by her mother. Zoya wondered why father had not married a second time. His temples were greying, and during the past few days his shoulders seemed to have drooped.

Their house was large and roomy, but few voices were heard in it. It had a shelf of books, a piano and there were bunches of dry wheat stalks on the walls. The purple silk of the challenge banners won by the MTS shone in the corner: one from the Ministry of Agriculture, another from the Central Council of Trade Unions, and a third awarded by the Regional Executive Committee during the evacuation. They should have been put up in the club, but the club-house wasn't ready yet, so the manager kept them at home for the time being. He kept the banners at home, while his personal correspondence was filed in the office, alongside official documents—yellowed letters from the front, letters from numerous trainees of the Solonchany MTS. "Dear Karp Vasilyevich!", "our MTS," "our people," "our work,"—so they ran; how could he draw a line between personal and official, how separate his from what was no less his? And in any case why separate at all?

Father had not finished his meal when the chief agronomist—portly, pink-cheeked, and nicknamed the Mother-Heroine—burst into the room. He qualified for the soubriquet when he appeared at a celebration, hav-

ing had one over the eight, with his wife's medal* on his chest among his own. The good-humoured agronomist responded to his nickname willingly.

"Didn't I tell you, Karp Vasilyevich," he said loudly, seating himself at the table, "to stop worrying about Zoya, and to find her a stepmother. You wouldn't listen—now you have nothing but curd and dumplings for dinner."

"I mightn't even have curd and dumplings if there was a stepmother around," Karp Vasilyevich intervened for his daughter, and, changing the subject, told the agronomist that a consignment of new tractors was due soon.

"Finding drivers for them won't be easy," the agronomist replied anxiously. "We teach people to drive, train them—and all for someone else."

"Don't grumble," Karp Vasilyevich interrupted, "wait till you hear the rest, Filipp Zakharych. I've been told that we shall have to transfer some of our drivers to the forest shelter-belt station."

The agronomist clasped his hands in dismay:

"When?"

"Soon," the manager replied, "it's got to be done quickly."

Zoya listened intently to the conversation. She was by no means indifferent to the news. A pity to see drivers go, but the shelter-belt station needed people too. Who would be transferred, she wondered. The agronomist had his own point of view on that:

"Let them have as much trouble with the drivers as we've had!"

"No," was Karp Vasilyevich's calm reply, "we'll send them the best we have. The very best!"

* Mothers of ten and more children are awarded the Mother-Heroine medal.—*Tr.*

"Do you really mean that, Karp Vasilyevich?"

"Absolutely. We mustn't lose any time, let's decide now."

Zoya heard her father name the drivers, and he actually named the cream. Maybe he would include Oksana Boiko? Did Zoya want him to name her? Naturally. If Oksana were transferred to the forest station, Savva Grek would forget her soon enough and take notice of others.

But Father had not named Oksana—not yet. He was probably deliberating the matter that very moment, for they were discussing her No. 8 Team.

But he did not put Oksana's name on the list.

Zoya, to her disappointment, heard her father name another driver from Oksana's team.

VI

Next day Oksana came tearing into the MTS on a motor-cycle. She barged into the office like a whirlwind and demanded an interview with the manager. He was not in, so she turned her fury on the chief agronomist:

"What d'you think you're doing? D'you want to ruin my team, taking my best drivers?"

"Put it in the singular," said the agronomist affably. "We are taking one."

"But why Oprishko of all people?" Oksana stormed.

"And why not Oprishko? Do you know where he is going? He'll work in the shelter-belt station."

"That's not our concern!" Oksana parried.

"But it is our concern, Comrade Boiko—it's a matter of the common weal."

Zoya, who heard every word, smiled at Mother-Heroine using the very arguments against Oksana that Father had used against him the night before.

In the corridor a little later Zoya met Oksana. Her hand was smeared in lubricating oil so she offered her plump, sun-tanned elbow instead. Concealing her injury, Zoya had no choice but to shake it.

"Why did she do that?" Zoya thought bitterly, later on. "To show me up as a ninny? But all the women cannot be like her. Maybe I, too, want to put on goggles, and tear across the fields like the wind, or tackle the agronomist as she did today? But everyone can't have her temper, and, after all, someone has to work in the radio-room. She sneers at my sandals and braided hair, no doubt, and at my soft hands. But am I to blame for that? Is it wrong for me to have a liking for Savva Grek?"

When Oksana left, the office-girls teased Zoya laughingly:

"Your future stepmother is as hot as pepper!"

"What makes you think she'll be my stepmother?"

"What, pretending you don't know? Why she's pining away for Karp Vasilyevich."

Pining away! And those overalls full of her, ready to burst along the seams, Zoya thought.

"Poppycock!" she said aloud. "Our Savva seems to be—"

But they interrupted her: "Savva's drawing a blank with her. He hasn't a chance!"

"But he's trying!" Zoya thought with pain, "even the girls say so. And if he is, he'll get what he's after!"

It seemed to Zoya that everyone looked at the mechanic with her eyes, that he was as irresistible to the others as he was to her.

The girls were joking, no doubt, when they said Oksana was "pining away." And what if this were really the case? Would she not be better as a stepmother than—

She was Zoya's rival, and a rival she would remain.

VII

Sometimes the radio brought strange voices to Zoya's radio-room, voices that also asked about rain. This did not surprise her, for every year more and more of the MTSs in the south were equipped with radio.

One voice affected her more than all the others. If she had heard call signs from Mars she would probably have been less excited than when she heard that voice. It was a happy, intimate voice. It sounded as though it were at Zoya's side, and even startled her. Twice in succession this unknown voice repeated joyfully:

"Do you see the cloud?"

"Do you see the cloud?"

And then the voice faded and was lost. The stunned girl looked out of the window, searching the sky in vain for the mysterious cloud. "He wasn't calling me!" she realized at last. "He was calling somebody else, I logged him by accident. But what a fine, pleasant voice. Just like Savva's!"

More than once that day she caught herself longing for that strange youthful voice again, the voice that reported the cloud: Where was it, whence to expect it?

But the radio was silent

"Who could it have been?" Zoya asked herself. "Maybe a pilot of some aircraft? Maybe he was flying at a high altitude and saw rain clouds coming our way."

But the sun blazed as before. It seemed as if the wheat was clinging on to life with failing strength under its scorching rays. An unbearable sight!

Zoya told the girls in the office about the mysterious voice and they were bursting with curiosity.

"Who d'you think it was?" they chorused.

Zoya smiled:

"A friend."

She did not tell them that to her the voice sounded like Savva's. The girls kept nagging her:

"You're keeping something from us, Zoya. Come on, tell us: Who are those friends of yours? Where are they?"

"Everywhere," Zoya replied seriously, making a circular motion with her hand.

Then in the afternoon came the long-awaited rain.

A barely visible strip of dark-blue cloud appeared slowly from beyond the horizon. The parched steppe grew still, as though waiting for it with bated breath. The strip, meanwhile, stretched upwards, becoming wider and gradually turning into a cloud—a dark-blue mountain chain that soon covered a large segment of the sky.

A sheet of flame slashed it from top to bottom. Thunder boomed. The fields breathed a sigh of relief and there was joy everywhere.

The steppe came to life. While the thunder-clouds gathered in the heavens, while everything up there rolled and heaved, little whirlwind flocks rolled over the wheat fields, across the darkening steppe; the green walls of the forest shelter belt grew restless and birds darted to and fro in disturbed flight.

The acacias by the office building reacted with a tender rustling.

Karp Vasilyevich, looking years younger, stood on the porch, cap in hand, gazing upwards as if expecting a long-awaited guest.

Zoya was warbling a gay tune in the radio-room. No sooner had the strip of cloud appeared on the horizon than she rushed to the map spotted with pin-sized red flags. There she had all the work-teams before her as on the palm of her hand. Looking at them excitedly,

she tried to decide which of them had already seen the cloud. Over there, she reckoned, the first glad shadows were floating above the fields, running ahead of the rain, whilst there, a little farther, the sun was still blazing, and the people out in the fields were as yet unaware of the joy that had gripped the MTS—its workers, its chiefs, and Zoya, the radio operator.

The glad tidings must reach all ears!

Zoya contacted the teams that still sweated in the scorching heat: "Have you seen the cloud?"

"Have you seen the cloud?" she warbled like a lark. With childish generosity Zoya was passing on the good news and felt all the happier for doing it.

The thunder and lightning drew nearer. A grey cloud heavily laden with moisture descended on the steppe, and bright sheets of rain spread to the horizon. Nearer and nearer.... The smell of hot dust now turning into mud came from the highway. The first large drops fell with a muffled ring, a quiver ran through the greenery beneath her window, and the enchanting music of raindrops reached her. It was a refreshing May downpour—"gold dropping from the heavens," as they say.

Long had they waited for it, and somewhere in Zoya's boundless fields her innumerable friends were still waiting. She hastened to let them know that it had come.

But she hesitated to contact Oksana Boiko. Her rival had caused her much pain; did she deserve to be told?

"Yes, yes!" Zoya's heart prompted. She contacted Oksana and sang out to the most distant trailer in the steppe: "Oksana, Oksana, d'you hear, d'you see?—Rain is coming your way!"

Oksana replied gratefully that she had seen it.

Zoya had no idea how pretty she was in her happiness. The excitement lent colour to her, beautified her as generously as a mother. Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks were aflame. Drenched to the bone, Savva Grek was looking in through the window, staring as if seeing the girl for the first time. He had been running past and sought shelter from the downpour near the office. He was on the point of continuing his journey, but the sight of her rooted him to the spot.

"Skylark! I've never seen you as pretty as this!"

Zoya started. She raised her eyes and smiled at Savva.

The steppe was hidden behind the curtain of rain, puddles gleamed on the highway. The soil drank greedily of the life-giving moisture. The wheat picked up noticeably, as though swelling with thick, green juice.

And the raindrops pattered and pattered....

Translated by V. Shneerson



YURY RYTKHEU

Chukchi Author

A Moscow writer staying in a Chukchi hunter's tent one day over twenty years ago, witnessed a rather curious method of telling the weather. A stark-naked boy, the hunter's six-year-old son, darted out of the tent into the freezing cold, stood shivering for a few seconds and then reported: in his well-founded opinion his father should put on so many parkas if he went hunting that day. From what the writer could judge this was a long established practice.

This fearless weather forecaster was no other than Yury Rytkeu (b. 1910) who was destined to become the first writer in the history of the Chukchi people who prior to the Revolution did not even have a written language of their own. Following in the foot-

steps of his father, Yury started out in life as a hunter, later working as stevedore and sailor as well. His literary career began in 1947. His writing is ingenuous, tinged with artlessly naive humour and a hint of archness. The subject of his stories is the life of the Chukchi in a Soviet state; the spot where he chooses to lay his scene is Dawn, the hunters' collective farm.

At present Yury Rytkeu is a post-graduate student at the Leningrad University. He is engaged in translating Russian classics and Soviet literature into his own language.

TEGRYNÉ FLIES TO KHABÁROVSK

Whose is that huge invisible hand stroking the grass on the aerodrome?

It lets the grass up for a second, then again presses it flat, stroking it down and letting it up, and stroking it down again. . . . It is the wind. But Tegryné cannot feel it. She is sitting in the passenger cabin of an aeroplane, the door is already shut and no wind can get inside. Even the strains of a march emitted by the loud-speaker from the roof of the airport building are scarcely audible.

The official in charge of the airfield has asked the people who came to see the passengers off to move away. They are out of sight now. All one can see through the thick glass of the windows is the green grass, pressed to the ground by the huge hand of the wind. Now the grass is floating away, faster and faster.

"We're off," says a stout passenger sitting in front of Tegryné.

And now Tegryné can see for herself that the plane is off the earth. The grass rushing past is at least two metres below. Perhaps, even three. At any rate she would be afraid to jump.

Higher and higher. Tegryné catches her breath. But she does not feel dizzy. "Not a bit dizzy, not the

tinest bit," she thinks to herself. "They needn't have told me all those terrible stories. I must write to Inryn and tell him I didn't feel the least bit dizzy."

And there's no rocking at all. In a *kayak*, even when the waves are very small, you feel the rocking much more. No, it's not like being in a *kayak*. Like a swing? Not like that either. Nothing can compare with this feeling of lightness, and freedom, and height, and speed!

The plane is turning. Look, there's a house down there. Surely it can't be the airport building? People are standing in front of it, waving. One of them is Tegryné's father, but she can no longer distinguish him from the others. She feels a little ashamed that she was not thinking of him just now: he must have been thinking of her all the time. And when they said good-bye she did not even give the old man a proper kiss. She was so busy kissing her girl-friends and then it was time to board the plane. Of course, she need not have hurried, but that stout man let her go first and the ladder was narrow; Tegryné did not want to delay her fellow-passenger. That would not have been proper—she just a girl, and he so respectable-looking and grey-haired. And so Tegryné only gave her old Memyl a hasty peck, and darted up the ladder.

The plane made another circle over the aerodrome; once again the airport building appeared and the group of people, who were now just tiny specks. Then the level airfield was gone and instead there were light-green and greenish-yellow hills below.

"We're laying on course," says the stout passenger. It is the first time Tegryné has heard this expression. It sounds funny: Why "laying"?

The stout passenger looks at his watch. No, he is not only looking at his watch, he has also a compass

on his wrist. Jabbing the compass with his finger and pointing in front of him, he says:

"We're heading south. Due south."

Tegryn  smiles. "Yes, it'll soon be autumn. Birds always go south in the autumn, to warm lands."

How lovely to feel that you are a bird! Now Tegryn  understands her neighbour's words: due south, right to Khabarovsk lies an invisible road across this ocean of sky; the pilot has gained height circling over the aerodrome, and now he has taken a southerly direction. It is as if he had laid his plane on this course. Well, now that he has done so, let it fly on and on! "Laying on course," says Tegryn  to herself. The expression no longer sounds funny to her. On the contrary, it has a kind of charm, it sounds professional. Tegryn  repeats the expression to herself and begins to feel almost like a pilot. Or if not a pilot, then at least a very experienced passenger, not just a novice making her first flight.

Suddenly it gets darker in the plane and there's nothing to be seen out of the windows; they are covered with a kind of greyish-white blanket.

"Oh! What's happened?" asks Tegryn .

But the stout passenger sitting opposite has already dozed off. She is answered by someone else sitting by the port window:

"Clouds. We're in the clouds."

In a minute the cabin grows lighter, the plane breaks free, and again the clear morning is shining in at the windows.

"Like a train coming out of a tunnel," says the other passenger. "It gets lighter and lighter, and suddenly the train shoots out of the hill into the open."

"I have never travelled on a train," replies Tegryn .

Below lie rolling hills with the silver ribbon of a river twisting among them. Only here and there the earth is covered by whitish-grey patches. They are clouds. Tegryné knows that now. To the right of each cloud she can make out its shadow on the ground.

The plane is flying above the clouds. Tegryné is on her way to Khabarovsk.

A slim, lithe schoolgirl was out in the tundra, gathering flowers. No, she had no bouquet in her hand, she was carrying a thick Russian book called *Flora of the North*, and between its pages lay the flowers she had managed to collect. In the book there were no two flowers alike, just one specimen of each species.

When the girl bent down, her black plaits brushed the grass. She would choose the very best flower, making sure to pick it together with a leaf, count the stamens, and, smoothing it out neatly so that none of the petals should get crushed, put her find away in the book.

The girl was Tegryné, daughter of Memył, the hunter. She was studying at the secondary school in Anadyr and used to come home to her father at the Dawn Collective Farm for her holidays. Her mother had died when she was quite a baby. But her friendship with her father was such as none of her classmates had with their parents.

When Tegryné was in the fourth form, there were only four forms in her settlement school. But Tegryné and her class-mates were lucky: that very year the school was made into a regular seven-year school. And three years later, when the final examinations were held, Tegryné proved to be one of the best.

She wanted to carry on with her studies, so Memył took her to Anadyr. As soon as she started at the ten-

year secondary school there, she took a strong fancy to botany. Nothing interested her more than the life of plants. She was elected head of the young naturalists' circle. Even the arctic winter did not prevent her collecting for the herbarium. On Sunday ski outings she would make her way with other girls to where the reindeer had scratched the snow off their winter pastures, and there would gather a collection of lichens.

The teacher in charge of the circle, Maria Feoktistovna, would often talk to the children about her native parts. She came from the richly wooded countryside of the Bryansk Region. The village where she grew up was even called Upper Foresters. Dense forests surrounded it on three sides and there were orchards round every cottage. When Maria Feoktistovna spoke of the murmuring forests, her eyes would grow thoughtful. She would gaze at the frost-patterned window, and Tegryn  would do the same. To the girl, who had never seen trees except at the cinema or in illustrated magazines, the frost pictures on the panes seemed like a winter forest clad in silver and white. And she would take the howl of the snow-storm raging outside the window for the whispering of the trees—a sound she had never once heard in her life.

That summer, when Tegryn  had returned home for the holidays, besides the clothes and books her little travelling-bag contained a dozen sprouting onion bulbs. With her father's help she made two little boxes, filled them with earth, and after planting the onions, placed the boxes in the sun outside the *yaranga*. At night and on cold dull days old Memyl would move this "kitchen garden" indoors. Soon he became so enthusiastic over his daughter's hobby that he took charge of the onions entirely, watering them liberally from the stream and carefully, as Tegryn  instructed, loosening the surface of the earth. Every day the green

shoots pushed up higher, gladdening the heart of the old man and amazing the neighbours. It was the first vegetable garden ever to be grown in this hunters' collective farm.

That summer sixteen-year-old Tegryné was out in the tundra from dawn to dusk, adding to her collections. The young naturalists' plan of work had been drawn up back in Anadyr under the guidance of Maria Feoktistovna. Tegryné carried out the plan with a will. She sought out the required plants on hill slopes and on the banks of streams; she climbed mountains and ventured many miles out into the tundra. She made four collections: of mosses, berries, medicinal herbs, and nectar-yielding arctic plants. Anyone who thought arctic vegetation was poor would surely have changed his mind had he tramped the tundra with Tegryné.

It was during that summer that the unhappy accident happened with father's binoculars. Old Memyl had an excellent pair of binoculars, one of his proudest possessions. When the work of collecting nectar-yielding plants was over, Tegryné took it into her head to start collecting specimens of seaweeds from the Chukotsk Sea. This idea received the warm support of her old friend Inryn, son of Gemauge, the ivory-carver. They set off together in a *kayak*, keeping close to the shore. Tegryné had taken her father's binoculars with her, thinking it would be too much for the naked eye to distinguish the seaweeds through the thick layer of water. But right at the beginning of this "scientific expedition," when the young naturalist was telling her friend what useful properties seaweeds possessed, the *kayak* rolled suddenly. Tegryné grabbed at the gunwale, and the binoculars slipped from her hand into the water.

Both Inryn and Tegryné dived for those binoculars

until they were blue with cold. Even on hot August days only the polar bears can get any pleasure out of bathing in the Chukotsk Sea. Besides, while diving, Inryn and Tegryné nearly lost their *kayak*, which began drifting out to sea, and they had to swim quite a distance to catch it. In short, they did not reach home until late in the afternoon, wet through and shivering, with no seaweeds and no binoculars. The loss of the latter was, of course, the most tragic.

Luckily, Tegryné's father was not at home; he had been kept at a meeting of the collective-farm management board. Tegryné had time to rub herself thoroughly and change into warm clothes. But how to tell Father about the missing binoculars?

Now, two years after, sitting in an aeroplane on her way to Khabarovsk, Tegryné can smile over that incident. But then she did not feel at all like smiling.

Tired of waiting for her father, Tegryné went round to neighbour Gemauge. There everything was peaceful; engrossed in his work the craftsman had not even noticed the state Inryn had appeared in, and had not even asked why the boy wanted to change his clothes.

The schemes those worried youngsters concocted! Most of them, to be candid, were not very courageous, the general aim being to avoid explaining to old Memyl what had happened. At first Tegryné wanted to run away to Anadyr there and then without waiting for the end of the holidays. Inryn had another suggestion—they must set off into the interior of the peninsula, to some distant relations who lived at one of the reindeer-breeding collective farms; if they went to Anadyr, their parents would find them immediately, but in the tundra it was easier to hide... Neither of these plans survived more than five minutes.

Suppose they stayed at home and pretended nothing had happened? Perhaps the loss would not be noticed

at once, because the binoculars case was still hanging on the wall as usual—who would know that it was empty? No, that was not much good either. It could only delay the explanation for two or three days at the most. Afterwards Tegryné would have to confess just the same, or Father might think some other person had taken them, and that would be too bad altogether.

In the end Tegryné decided to tell her father everything. Inryn suggested asking Gemaugé to mediate for her, but Tegryné turned that down: she was to blame, she must answer for it.

At first her father did not even believe her. He went over to the binoculars case, opened it and examined it carefully as if the binoculars might be hidden somewhere in the corner. You could see that he was upset. Then he went up to Tegryné and asked:

"What are you crying for, daughter? Never mind, my eyes are still sharp enough. Even without binoculars I can spot game where other men cannot."

"But you always took them with you when you went out hunting."

"I know I did, daughter. But that was just showing off. It was really. The truth is, I hardly ever used them. And when I was hunting they were rather a nuisance. When you hunt you need to have as few burdens as possible...."

Tegryné realized he was saying this to comfort her, and her tears flowed all the more freely.

"Don't cry, daughter," said old MemyI severely. "You're not a little girl now, you know. Only mean, stupid people cry over lost things."

"But I took the binoculars without asking!"

"Yes, you should have asked, of course. But I'm your father, you're my daughter. And everything we have belongs to both of us. So you are crying over your own loss, Tegryné. At least, almost your own. You

ought to be ashamed.... Come now, better tell me what kind of seaweeds you were going to collect."

And he listened with interest to what she told him about seaweeds containing iodine and bromine, and about seaweeds that would replace the very best potassium fertilizers.... Tegryn  could see it clearly now: her father was just trying to take her mind off the loss of the binoculars. But who knows? Perhaps he really was interested, and not very upset over his loss. After all, he was not a greedy man. He was only greedy when it came to knowledge—like Tegryn  herself....

Tegryn  remembered how her father came to possess the binoculars. She was only a slip of a girl then, about ten or eleven.

One day a scientist arrived at the collective farm, a collector of folk songs and tales. They sent him to Memy  because Memy  was considered the best story-teller in the whole village. After listening to Memy  all the evening and filling up a whole notebook, the scientist said:

"It's a long time since I met such a wonderful story-teller. You certainly deserve your reputation. But you can hardly call this folk-lore in the true sense of the word. What you tell are actually stories, not folk tales. They are interesting incidents from your own life and sometimes retellings, also very interesting and unusual, of certain works in Russian literature. There is something here of Gogol, something of Gorky. But I should like to hear a story of your own making. Or something you have heard from your own people. But it must be folk-lore, something the people have composed themselves."

"Oh no, I can't compose anything," laughed Memy . "I base my stories mostly on what my daughter reads to me. The neighbours like hearing these stories from Russian books because they are true to life, and

there are still too few books in the Chukchi language. But for songs and folk tales, you should go to another *yaranga*. Tomorrow I'll take you to old Atyk. He makes up songs himself and is the best song-maker you will find on this coast."

The scientist stayed the night with them. Not wishing to disturb his hosts, he said he would sleep in the passage, but Memyl replied:

"We Chukchi have a tradition: if you have a guest and no wood to light the fire—break up your sledge for firewood so your guest can warm himself; if you have no sledge, break up one of the poles of your *yaranga*. I cannot let you sleep in the passage."

Tegryné made up a bed for the guest in the *polog*. For the bed she used the skin of a bear that Memyl had killed some two years before. The guest lay down and by the light of the wick-lamp started reading a book. Memyl asked what the book was called. Instead of a reply the guest began reading aloud. It was Nekrasov's poems. Memyl and Tegryné liked the poetry very much. They listened so attentively and so often asked him to read more, that a day or two later when he was leaving the village, the scientist presented them with the book.

Memyl did not refuse. "You must like this book very much if you brought it with you on such a long journey," he said, and in return gave the scientist the bearskin. "Thank you," said the scientist. "But let the book be my present to Tegryné and you take my binoculars."

And that was how Memyl came to possess a pair of binoculars. And he had kept this wonderful instrument until Tegryné took it into her head to start collecting seaweeds. . . .

The unsuccessful expedition ending with a bathe in the icy waters of the Chukotsk Sea did not cool Teg-

ryné's love for plants. Two years passed, Tegryné finished secondary school successfully and now her passion no longer went by the name of botany, a subject known to every school child, but bore the impressive name of agrobiology. But, just as before, she could sit for hours over her herbariums, talking about orchards she had never seen and dreaming of the black currants and strawberries that would grow in places now only fit for cloudberry and cranberry and the arctic *shiksha* berries.

The next step was the institute. That was what the teachers advised, what Tegryné wanted and what old Memyl himself wanted, sad as he felt at the thought of parting with his daughter. Khabarovsk was much farther away than Anadyr! Tegryné had been coming home from Anadyr twice every year—for the summer and the winter holidays. And Memyl used to visit his daughter another couple of times every winter. Now Tegryné would only be able to come home once a year, for the summer. The winter holidays were too short to make a trip from Khabarovsk. And letters would take three times as long as before.... True, old Atyk had a son studying even farther away—in Leningrad. But Atyk's wife was alive and they had other children who were living with them. And Memyl had no one but his daughter.

Yet Memyl did not want to keep his daughter from going. Certainly not! Let her study, let her find out everything Memyl had not been able to, let all the roads that were once closed to the Chukchi be open to her.

For the journey, Aunt Nutenaiut made some pancakes fried in seal fat. When Tegryné came to say good-bye, the pancakes were ready. Uncle Gemalkot wrapped them up neatly in a clean cloth with leather on the outside to stop the fat coming through.

"Oh, you shouldn't have packed so many!" exclaimed Tegryn .

"Food is no burden on the road," insisted Gemalkot firmly. "If you go for a day take supplies for a week."

"And if you go by sea take enough for three," added Nutenaiut. "Take them, Tegryn , I know you like these pancakes. And Memyl likes them too. You have a long journey ahead of you, they will come in useful, I am sure!"

"We're only going by sea as far as Anadyr. Father will see me off as far as there. Then I go by plane. That is for winning a medal on finishing school. He promised me that a long time ago."

"By aeroplane?" Nutenaiut dropped down on the whalebone stool and gazed at her niece as if Tegryn  had suddenly turned into somebody else. "By aeroplane! If only your poor mother could see you now, going to Khabarovsk to study! And by aeroplane, too!"

And for Gemalkot, Tegryn  and Nutenaiut herself these words made the whole significance of the coming flight clear. Yes, they had already got used to such things, even the old people. But twenty years ago, when Tuar was alive, it would have seemed a miracle. How Tuar would have worried about her daughter! And yet, also, what pride would have filled her heart!

And now this metal bird is carrying Tegryn  away to Khabarovsk on its mighty wings, carrying her over the bays and inlets of the Okhotsk Sea, over the spurs of the Jugjur Mountains.

"In Khabarovsk I'll be sure and buy Father a pair of binoculars," thinks Tegryn , and at the thought of her father a smile lights up her face. "I'll buy him the most expensive pair there is, so that they'll be even better than the old ones."

Tegryné notices her thoughts that have just seemed clear and logical suddenly becoming muddled and vague. Then she discovers that her eyes are shut. Apparently she has been lulled into a doze.

"It must have been his example that put me to sleep," thought Tegryné, surveying the stout passenger in front of her. "It's all right for him to sleep, he's probably flown twenty times before. But I must make use of every second, or I'll miss something very interesting."

The stout passenger, to judge by the looks of him, is a geographer. Or a geologist. Very likely he belongs to some expedition. Perhaps he even heads one. In the first place, there is that compass on his wrist. Secondly, when everyone else handed in suit-cases for the luggage compartment he handed in only a big rucksack with four outer pockets tight-packed. Greying hair, a calm, clever face. . . . "He's a professor of geology," decided Tegryné. "His expedition has discovered a new mineral field. A very important one. Gold, or oil, or apatite. And he had been called urgently to Moscow to report to the Government about it. Most likely he's not sleeping at all, but thinking out what he's going to say."

Of course, this passenger might not be a geologist at all, he could be an engineer or an official auditor who had been to Anadyr to check the accounts of some establishment there. Be that as it may, Tegryné was already helping him to compose his report for the Council of Ministers. She would have said in his place: "Honourable Comrade Ministers, I am happy to be able to report to you a discovery that will bring further prosperity to one of the borderlands of our great country. The deposits we have discovered lead us to suppose that there are many other valuable mineral deposits in the same region. They must be discovered, and they will be discovered! The numbers of local residents capable of this work are growing. In the plane that brought me

here I met a Chukchi girl. She was flying to Khabarovsk to study...."

Tegryné is so carried away that she forgets for a moment that she is going to study agrobiolgy, not geological prospecting.

The other passengers are a little better known to her. They had time to get to know each other at the airport while waiting for the plane. This man was the only one to arrive at the last moment. And when they came down to refuel he walked about for ten minutes to stretch his legs, sat down on a boulder, pulled out a notebook and made notes in it until the pilot asked the passengers to board the plane again. And so Tegryné does not know whether she has guessed his profession correctly or not.

Two of the other passengers work in the northern navigation system and are returning from a commission trip. One of them is a famous airman, a Hero of the Soviet Union, who took part in record-breaking flights that amazed the world in the days when Tegryné was still a little girl. He is now middle-aged.

Rentyrgin, a Chukchi working at a fish cannery, is on his way to a regional conference of leading workers in the fish industry.

A *Soyuzpushnina** representative—a little, sharp-eyed fellow, rather like a furry animal himself—is carrying on as if he were not above the clouds at all, but in his own office. He keeps pulling files out of his huge brief-case, turning over pages covered with figures and underlining things with a thick red pencil.

A member of the Territorial Executive Committee and a newspaper reporter also seem to be experienced air travellers. They are playing chess. Tegryné has never seen a chess set like theirs before: instead of a board they have a kind of leather wallet with a lining of

* *Soyuzpushnina*—All-Union Fur-Trading Association.—Tr.

alternate black and white squares; the figures are made of plastic and lie flat in slits cut in each square. The players are so absorbed in their game that they don't even raise their heads to look out of the window.

Well, Tegryné can find something to occupy herself with too; after all, it's not her first hour in the air.

She takes a book out of her bag and tries to read. But it is no good: her eyes keep wandering to the window beyond which fresh scenes of rare and inexpressible beauty unfold every minute before her gaze.

When the plane banks slightly to the left, Tegryné glimpses over the bent heads of the chess-players at the glistening expanse of the sea. Once a little ship appeared, but all the rest of the time there has been nothing but the boundless sea, every wave glinting in the sunshine.

And on the right are the mountains! Range after range of magnificent snow-capped peaks and high plateaus. Perhaps this is the Oimekon tableland? No, they must have left that behind already.

At last the stout passenger opens his eyes. Tegryné decides to seize her opportunity.

"When you look down," she says, "it doesn't seem like the real earth below you, it seems like a map. Look, it's just like a map, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. When you fly at a great height the map effect is even stronger."

"But aren't we flying at a great height now?"

"Now?" the stout passenger looks down. "Must be about a thousand metres."

"A thousand metres?! A whole kilometre above the earth?!"

"Yes. This must be your first trip by air?"

"Is it very noticeable?"

"No, not very ... hardly at all, in fact. And as for the appearance of the earth's surface from the air resembling its conventional representation on the map, that's not such a simple thing as it seems. Remember that the symbols used in map-making were established long before the coming of aviation. And to think they practically coincide with the bird's-eye view we actually get from an aeroplane! A wonderful coincidence, I call it."

"Definitely a geographer!" thinks Tegryné, listening to the stout passenger with interest. She never thought of all this when she said the earth looked like a map from above.

Again she looks out of the window. The mountains here are not like they are up North. They are dark green, but the colour is not even, not continuous, it cannot be the colour of the mountains themselves. It is more like a great herd of thousands of strange animals grazing on the mountain slopes. Yes, that's it: to Tegryné the tousled, dark-green mass seems alive. "It's a forest!" guesses Tegryné.

"Tell me, please," she asks, "are those forests down there, on the mountain sides?"

"They are. Real mountain forests. We left the bare tundra behind long ago."

"Forests! Real forests!" Tegryné repeats to herself. How long she has been yearning to see them!

There are already several timber houses standing beside the *yarangas* in her native village. The steamers brought them to Chukotka in parts—hundreds of logs on one ship. All along the street there are posts with electric bulbs hanging from them and swaying in the wind. These posts are also logs, and every log was once the trunk of a living tree, a green tree that grew and waved its branches and whispered to its fellows. Tegryné has often read of this, and often admired pic-

tures of forests. "If all the logs in our village," she thought when she was in the ninth form, "suddenly came to life, stood up and sunk their roots into the ground, and dressed themselves in leaves, they would probably make a whole forest!"

The autumn storms often used to throw tree-trunks up on the shore. There were no leaves on them, their branches were broken, and yet you could still feel the life in them.

Tegryné would spend hours examining this gift of the sea until Memyl or one of the other hunters started carving it into beams to make himself a new sledge or a frame for a *kayak*.

And now Tegryné is flying over country where dense forests stretch for hundreds of kilometres. "What is the noise of trees like?" wonders Tegryné. "Like the howling of a snow-storm or the roar of the sea? Or perhaps it is like the hum of an aeroplane engine?"

She decides that as soon as she has registered at the institute in Khabarovsk she will go straight to the nearest forest. Or take a bus there if it is not very near. She will touch the trunks of the living trees with her hands, watch them wave their branches greeting the wind, and listen to their rustling.

She wants to ask her neighbour if there are any forests near Khabarovsk, but his eyes are again closed. Is he dozing, or is he thinking with his eyes closed to concentrate his attention? One way or other, there is no point in troubling him with her questions.

Although Tegryné tried very hard to imprint on her memory every incident of the journey and miss nothing of interest, it so happened that her neighbours had to wake her up when the plane landed at the Khabarovsk aerodrome. She must have been very tired. All night before the take-off Tegryné had talked with a girl-friend

of hers in Anadyr with whom she and her father had stayed. Father had slept in the next room and the girls had not got a wink until dawn. The sleepless night, the parting, the host of new impressions during the flight—it had all tired Tegryné out.

"We shan't be flying any further," said the stout passenger, touching her shoulder. "Good-morning!" he added with a smile, although it was late evening outside.

Tegryné stepped out of the plane. It was quite dark, like winter. In Chukotka even in the dead of night it was never so dark in August.

With her fellow-travellers she crossed the landing-field to the airport building.

"Welcome to Khabarovsk, Comrades!" said the officer on duty at the airport. "Sit down and rest for a moment. The bus will be here in exactly five minutes. And your car's here already, Yury Nikolayevich," he turned to the member of the Territorial Executive Committee. "It's been waiting for half an hour."

"Very well! Comrades, who is coming with me? There are three vacant seats."

"No, thanks," replied the famous airman. "We'll wait for the bus."

"All right, I'll leave you behind. You're an old-timer here in Khabarovsk. But I can drop the newcomers wherever they happen to be going. . . . Hullo, Igor!" he greeted his driver who had just entered the waiting-hall. "Be a good fellow and take Comrade Rentyrgin's case. And I'll take yours, Tegryné. Oho, what a weight! Must be books, eh?"

"That's right. It's mostly books."

"I thought so. And you're a guest, Comrade Kholmogorov, you come with us too."

Kholmogorov, which was the name of the stout passenger, answered:

"I'm a frequent guest in Khabarovsk. And besides, I'll take up the whole car."

But Yury Nikolayevich dragged him along too.

The town was well lighted, but Tegryné could hardly see anything: they had put her in the middle, the right window being blocked by Kholmogorov, the left by Rentyrgin. These two got out at the Amur Hotel and the car swept on to the hostel of the Pedagogical Institute.

They turned into a side street where there was not a single street-lamp. Only a narrow strip of pavement showed up in the car's headlights.

"Disgraceful!" grumbled Yury Nikolayevich. "Disgraceful! Only two weeks left to the beginning of the term, and they haven't got the lights on yet. It's a new district, you see, we've only just started building it. But the builders promised the Committee that by the first of September the students' hostel would have light and water, and everything else."

The car stopped. The driver brought out Tegryné's case and put it down at the door, then returned to the car. But they did not leave until the hostel warden answered Tegryné's knock.

"Coming, coming!" called a sleepy voice. "Who's there?"

After a few words with Tegryné the warden went back for the keys.

"Good-bye, Tegryné!" shouted Yury Nikolayevich. "Good luck!"

"Good-bye!"

The car turned round carefully and drove away. Tegryné was left alone. The wind got up and overhead there was a sound as if it was driving thousands of snow-flakes against the outer skins of a *yaranga*. But what snow could there be in August?! No, it was more

like the beat of many wings—you hear a sound like that when a huge flock of eiders pass low overhead.

The warden returned with the keys and opened the door.

Tegryné is shown into a room where two other girls are sleeping. Actually only one of them is asleep, the other has woken up and a minute or two after Tegryné has got into bed, asks her:

“Are you asleep yet, dear?”

“Not yet.”

“What’s your name?”

“Tegryné.”

“Tegryné? Never heard such a name before. Sounds nice. You’re from Chukotka, aren’t you?”

“Yes. And what’s your name?”

“My name’s Svetlana. Sveta for short. Why have you arrived so late? The exams will soon be over.”

“They’ve already admitted me. I sent my documents by post and they wrote back to say I was already admitted.”

“Did you get a medal when you left school?”

“Yes. Only a silver one though.”

“Doesn’t matter, you won’t have to take any exams. That was smart of you! Well, good-night, I expect you’re tired after your journey. Did it take long?”

“No. I came by plane.”

“Really?! I bet you were afraid!”

“Not a bit.”

“How interesting! Tomorrow you must tell us all about it. I’ve never flown in my life. But let’s go to sleep now, we two have got a consultation tomorrow.”

“Good-night.”

But a minute or two later Svetlana whispers again:

“Tegryné, are you asleep yet?”

"No."

"What faculty will you be in?"

"Natural sciences. And you?"

"I'm going in for literature. The faculty of Russian language and literature. Varya's taking literature too. That girl over there, our room-mate. Her name's Varya."

"I wanted to go in for literature as well. But they told me you couldn't take two subjects at once."

"No, you can't take two at once. Only one at a time."

"They told me if I wanted they could put me down for natural sciences and that I would be able to study literature in one of the circles."

"That's right, in the literary circle. And apart from that— Here, you know what I've thought of?"

"What?"

"Listen. I'm very interested in natural sciences too. Let's make an agreement: I'll tell you about everything we learn in our faculty, and you'll tell me everything you learn in yours. Agreed?"

"All right."

"Well, that's fixed. Now we'll go to sleep. Or else I'll fail the day after tomorrow and it will be all up with our agreement."

The girls fall silent, but again only for a minute. This time it is Tegryné who breaks the silence.

"Svetlana!" she whispers almost inaudibly, so as not to disturb her new friend in case she is already falling asleep.

"Yes?"

"Svetlana, just one question. Do you know whether you can buy binoculars here?"

"Buy what?"

"Binoculars."

"Binoculars? Of course you can. I've already been round a few of the shops. This is my first time in Khabarovsk too, you know."

"Where do you come from, then?"

"From Komsomolsk. But what do you need binoculars for?"

"That's a long story."

"Did your boy-friend ask you to send them?"

"No, they're not for a boy-friend. I'll tell you in the morning. Good-night."

And at last the girls fall asleep.

In the morning Tegryné wakes up because the sun is shining through the curtains right into her face. Next to the bed there is a chair with her dress hanging over it, and on the dress someone has pinned a note. Tegryné unpins it and reads: "We've gone for our consultation, dear (sorry, I forgot your name during the night; I remember it sounded nice, but have forgotten just what it was). We didn't want to wake you up, you were sleeping so soundly. You can use the food in our lockers. There are some nice things to eat there. If you need an iron you can ask the warden Her name's Auntie Dunya. The electricity is on now, so you can use the electric iron. If you come to the institute and want to find us, we shall be in lecture-room 62. Sveta and Varya."

Yes, perhaps she would need the iron. It looked like being sunny today, so she could put on her white blouse, and it had probably got pretty well creased in the suitcase. As for the food in Sveta's and Varya's lockers—Interesting to know what the nice things were. It is bad to refuse when people really want to give you something. But afterwards, when the girls came back to the hostel, Tegryné would treat them to the pancakes Aunt Nutenaiut had made.

Still holding the note in her hand, Tegryné drops back on the pillows and stretches herself happily.

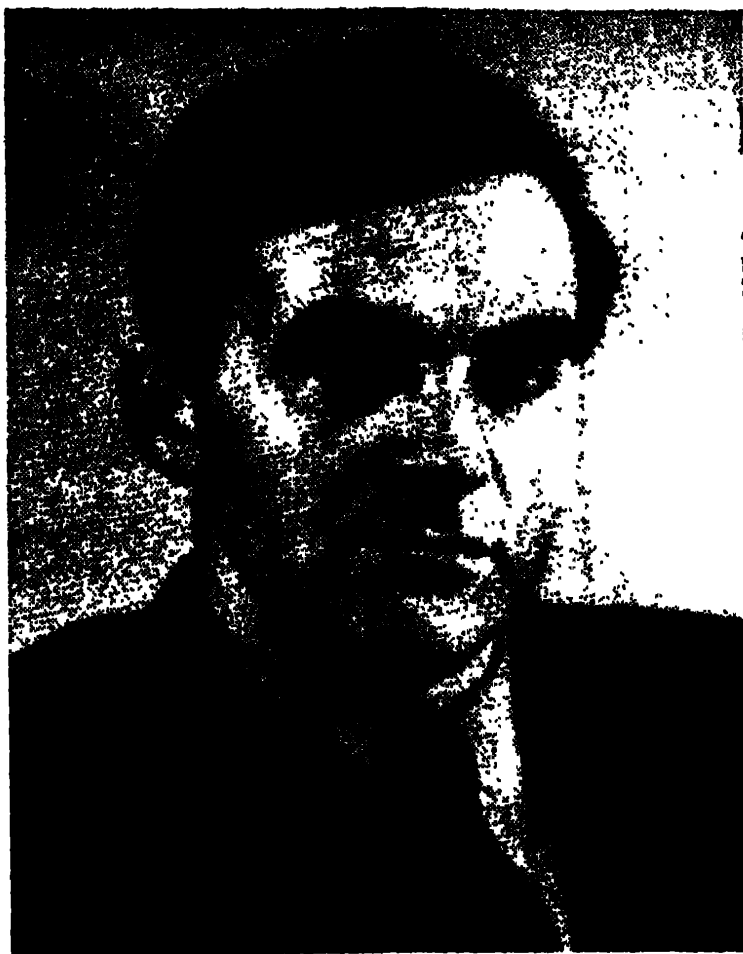
What funny curtains! All spotty somehow.... And these spots move! The pattern trembles and changes, getting darker and lighter!... Tegryn  frowns and rubs her eyes with her fists like a child. Oh no, they're not spots, they're shadows from the street. They must be—

And suddenly Tegryn  realizes what it is. She has seen it once in some film, these patches of sunlight dancing through the leaves stirring in the wind.

Barefoot, with only her night-dress on, Tegryn  dashes to the window and throws it wide open. Two tall birch-trees are stretching out their branches towards her. Green cool leaves, you can touch them with your fingers, press them to your cheek, to your lips....

Tegryn  looks down. Yes, this is the first floor. So last night when she was standing down there and Auntie Dunya went for the keys— But, of course, how could there have been a flock of eiders here! Simply, she had always thought trees would rustle close to the ground, not high above her head. It was the birch-trees that had whispered above her last night, it was the birch-trees' welcome.

Translated by D. Rottenberg



DANIIL GRANIN

Russian Author

Daniil Alexandrovich Granin (b. 1881) spent his childhood and youth in Leningrad, the city he later fought to defend in the years of the Great Patriotic War.

A graduate of the Leningrad Polytechnical Institute, D. Granin got his first practical experience as an electrical engineer at a plant, and later worked at a scientific research institute.

The usual hero of his stories is a young man, an inventor, and Granin chiefly writes about things he himself has gone through. His hero's enthusiasm, inspiration and creative zeal ring true and move the reader. The author's best works are his latest novel *Those Who Seek* published in 1914, and one of his earliest stories *Second Variant*.

SECOND VARIANT

Professor Sazonov was seriously ill. Alexander had never expected the old man to consent to review his theis. Yet here he was, even ringing Alexander up about it. Alexander had good reason to be pleased for Sazonov was considered one of the country's greatest experts on current rectifiers.

The professor lived in a three-storeyed house in the depths of the old park that belonged to the institute. The windows of the house looked out on to a field which before the war had been a sports ground. It still reminded one of the war—trenches on the tennis courts, crumbling, grass-grown dug-outs.

As he mounted the staircase he kept stopping to read the familiar names on the brass door-plates, names that were the pride of Soviet science.

The house was being redecorated. A bucket swung down past the banisters, as though into a well. Splashes of alabaster scattered on all sides. "Look out!" a shout came from above, to be followed at once by an authoritative voice replying:

"What are you shouting for? Didn't I tell you who lives here?"

"You did," a boyish voice answered despondently.

"You might have put one of these scientists right off his stroke with your shouting!"

The second voice was a trumpeting bass and it echoed from top to bottom of the staircase. Alexander laughed outright. He was in excellent spirits.

He found the professor in his study, in a deep arm-chair with cushions all round him. They had not seen each other since the winter and Alexander was alarmed at the change that had taken place in his former tutor. The figure in the chair was a frail and withered old man. He did not get up when Alexander entered and merely apologized for not being able to do so. His handshake was weak and trembling. For a time he smilingly observed his guest's embarrassed face. "Well, let's not waste time," he said curtly. "It's become too valuable to me these days. What can I do for you?"

Alexander tried to get away with a few hurried phrases of a general nature. He was inwardly reproaching himself for the visit, for burdening the sick man with his affairs, and his only thought was to bring the conversation to an end as quickly as possible. He desperately wanted to get away without offending the old man, without letting him feel the pity that his condition aroused. But Sazonov made him repeat the arguments of his thesis and insisted on details, and as the flow of questions increased, Alexander unconsciously began to talk as only a man who is in love with his work can talk.

He told the professor quite frankly about the defects of the apparatus he had designed. It was not powerful enough, the rectified current curve was jumpy and unreliable. He told him all the things that one never tells a future opponent, but that one can never fail to tell one's former tutor.

Sazonov nodded towards the thesis and Alexander carefully placed the cardboard-bound manuscript that still smelt of glue on the professor's knees. Sazonov turned the pages slowly, every movement costing him an effort. Then he began to argue. He reproached Ale-

xander crossly, pausing to recover his breath with difficulty; he asserted that Alexander's complaints were nonsense and the results he had achieved already of importance to industry.

Then he laughed. "Don't you find we have changed places?"

Alexander did not answer. The thought that Sazonov might suspect him of false modesty made him uncomfortable.

The professor examined one of the diagrams, thumbed through several pages of the manuscript, then returned to the diagram. It was as if he were chasing an idea that was slipping away from him. Alexander knew this way he had of screwing up his eyes and rubbing his eyelids with his finger-tips.

"I seem to remember," Professor Sazonov said tentatively, his eyes half closed, "I seem to remember a post-graduate student called Nikolayev working on a similar apparatus before the war. He told me— Yes, now I have it, it was his professor, Boris Alexeyevich—he's dead now—who told me about him. What became of that work I don't know. A failure, I suppose. Otherwise we should have heard something about it. Yes, Nikolayev.... Does that name convey anything to you?"

No, it was the first time Alexander had heard of Nikolayev. Where did he work?

Sazonov named a specialized research institute.

Alexander said he was interested and would make inquiries.

"Yes, of course you should. You never know, you might find something useful," Sazonov replied. "You have plenty of time while your opponents read your thesis. It should be better than hanging about and worrying."

He sent him off with a laugh and a joke as usual, his frail body fluttering on the cushions. The long con-

versation had by no means exhausted him. On the contrary, his drawn, sunken cheeks were rosier now. And as he left the house Alexander thought with affectionate admiration of this sick old man, who was dying, and who knew he was dying, and was in such a hurry to use every remaining minute that life granted him for his wise and splendid work.

If anyone could understand this inexorable need to calculate one's time to the last second it was Alexander.

Eighteen months ago, at a certain memorable Party meeting Professor Sazonov had been the first to support a speech made by Alexander.

Certain people at the institute were fond of talking about research as creative work that required spurts of inspiration. There was a slightly contemptuous attitude towards "plodders." Diligence was considered to be the preserve of the untalented. At this particular Party meeting Alexander had quoted some interesting figures. He had calculated that approximately two-thirds of a post-graduate's time was wasted in acquiring instruments, getting jobs done in the workshops, standing in queues for meals, and attending interminable faculty meetings.

"We work like the old steam-engines of Polzunov's time at about twenty per cent of our full capacity. Nikolai Ostrovsky was right when he said that a man ought to live so that he would not feel ashamed because his life had been wasted. But that's not enough. We ought to live so as not to be ashamed of a single wasted day."

After his four years of war service, time had acquired a special value for Alexander. He had vowed to make up for those years. He had studied on the tram going to the institute, at meal times, even at meetings he had managed to take a furtive glance at his books. He had passed his examinations for the degree of Candidate with excellent marks four months earlier than was expected of

him. He had completed his thesis six months ahead of his fellow-graduates.

In the past year or so he had come into contact with people who put their theses together with scissors and paste—"degree hunters" as Alexander's professor called them.

The type inspired Alexander with a profound dislike. He found himself checking every stage of his work with double care. His friends marvelled at the thoroughness of his experiments, which took every minute detail into account and excluded even the slightest possibility of error. It was for this reason that Professor Sazonov's remark about another man's work on Alexander's subject had roused Alexander's interest. If this unknown Nikolayev had been working on the same lines as he, he would have a fresh opportunity of checking his conclusions. Yet at the same time he experienced a vague feeling of anxiety. He made up his mind to visit the institute where Nikolayev had worked the very next day and find out what had become of his work.

The following day Alexander was told at the institute that Nikolayev had volunteered for the front in the autumn of 1941 and had soon afterwards been killed in the fighting round Leningrad. Alexander visited the laboratory where Nikolayev had worked. The only thing the people there could tell him was that Nikolayev had achieved some interesting results on a new type of rectifier, but had been prevented from completing his work by the war. The institute had no written records. When the war started the institute had gone over to a new line of research and too much had happened since then for them to be able to remember the exact nature of Nikolayev's researches. When Alexander said he wasn't satisfied they directed him to a Galina Sergeyevna.

"She's the only person who may be able to help you," they said. And he was surprised to notice that

they were as embarrassed as if they had told him a family secret.

Galina Sergeyevna turned out to be a young woman with smoothly combed black hair. She glanced round the door of a laboratory marked "No Admittance," looked Alexander severely up and down and told him to wait.

There are times when the relations between people become crystallized at the first moment of meeting. Alexander looked at the door that had been shut in his face and, shrugging his shoulders, wondered inwardly at the sudden and unjustified rush of dislike that had come over him.

Galina Sergeyevna reappeared pulling down the sleeves of her white coat. Alexander told her why he had come. When he mentioned Nikolayev's name her face flushed for a moment.

"Unfortunately I know hardly anything about Anatoly's subject, my subject is chemistry," she said curtly. "But all his notes are at his mother's house. I can give you her address," she added half reluctantly.

"Thanks. But do you know for sure if she still has them?" Alexander had decided to ignore her tone.

Her lip curled unpleasantly.

"Yes, of course. Haven't you finished your thesis?"

He caught the allusion and flushed.

"It's finished and handed in. Nikolayev's work interests me mainly from a historical point of view. In any case, if I find anything of interest there I should not think of using it without quoting the author's name," he added challengingly.

Now it was her turn to be embarrassed. Alexander noted down the address he needed and hastened to take his leave.

In his exasperation at this brief but unpleasant encounter he felt like dropping the whole thing. But his

habit of always finishing a job won the day. Assuring himself that the whole thing was a waste of time he set out to visit the address this unpleasant woman had given him.

Until the moment when Alexander saw Nikolayev's mother he had never thought of Anatoly Nikolayev as a person who had at some time actually lived here, in this town, who had come in and out of this overfurnished room, perhaps even slept on that well-worn plush couch. For him Nikolayev had been dead right from the beginning. It had never occurred to him that for Maria Timofeyevna her son still lived in a mother's unquenchable grief, impervious to the years, a grief that still showed in her faded eyes, in the fine web of wrinkles on her face, in the listlessness that pervaded all her movements.

When Alexander, trying to avoid mentioning her son's name too often, carefully explained why he had come, Maria Timofeyevna, who seemed to have understood very little of what he had said, asked, "Did you know Anatoly?"

And as Alexander again repeated the reasons for his visit it suddenly occurred to him that he could in fact have known Anatoly.

"I'll gladly show you his notes," said Maria Timofeyevna. "There's a whole suit-case full of them. We were evacuated but I kept them with me all through the war."

She pulled out an old and battered plywood suit-case from under the bed and went out for a rag to wipe it with. Alexander glanced round the room. A small desk stood in the corner by the window. It was covered with a clean sheet of paper and had a lifelessly tidy look about it. There was a photograph over the desk. Alexander went over to it. A thin, rather gloomy boyish face, very much like Maria Timofeyevna's, with fair hair tossed back and to one side, looked down at him from the wall.

On the desk, beside a dry ink-well, stood a framed photograph of Galina Sergeyevna. Alexander recognized her at once, though here she was only a girl and quite different. Her hair-style, even the shape of her face, was softer, more gentle. She gave Alexander such a friendly smile that his recent resentment vanished without a trace. Alexander went up to the bookshelf. Almost the same books that he had on his own shelves. Studies in electrical machinery, theory of ion rectifiers, high-tension engineering. . . . Only a few new editions published since the war were missing.

"I can't bring myself to part with these," Maria Timofeyevna said behind him. She had entered the room silently. "I gave all the rest away to his friends, a whole trunkful of them. But I kept these. There are a lot of notes in the margins in his handwriting."

There was something heroic in the way she lived with her grief, hiding nothing and forgetting nothing.

Maria Timofeyevna opened the suit-case and took out the carefully tied folders of papers.

Alexander sat down at the table. He opened the top packet. The cheap writing-paper had darkened round the edges and smelled of damp. The title was written on the front page in large childish characters. Though formulated differently, the subject was the same as Alexander's.

He read the introduction with a strange and growing curiosity feeling sad and anxious at the same time. Sometimes he involuntarily marked a doubtful passage with his finger-nail, realizing with condescending satisfaction that his own summary was much fuller.

He glanced through the reports of the first laboratory experiments without much interest. This was the inevitable tedious spade-work that any research scientist must do to prepare his apparatus and accumulate primary data. Then came the main thing, the search, the

groping for a new type of rectifier. Yes, that was all done. The well-travelled path of existing apparatuses had been left behind. Now the frontier had been reached. The Rubicon. Now there was nothing to change, nothing that could be added to, the creative work must begin.

Alexander had no difficulty in following Nikolayev's hastily abbreviated notes. Everything was familiar, he knew it all in his own thoughts and feelings. For a time Nikolayev moved forward along a different path, then their paths merged; and Alexander experienced the strange sensation of reading his own thoughts distorted only by another's handwriting, another man's method of reasoning. There was a kind of unevenness in Nikolayev's work, an impatience. Sometimes he would get stuck and repeat the same experiments over and over again; sometimes—and this happened more frequently—he leaped several stages in one bound and reached a point that it had taken Alexander much long and arduous reasoning to achieve.

Alexander grew impatient. He found himself scarcely able to resist the temptation to turn at once to the last folder.

Once he laughed incredulously. Anatoly Nikolayev had scrawled right across the page: "This is the parting of the ways. There is a Variant A and a Variant B. I shall take the more obvious road of Variant A, which I think offers the poorer results. I want to be absolutely sure." And he set out on the very path that Alexander had chosen without the slightest hesitation as the only correct one.

Alexander burst out laughing. It was a disdainful, nervous laugh. Nikolayev's words were a challenge.

"Does it amuse you?" Maria Timofeyevna spoke suddenly. Alexander tore himself away from his reading. She was sitting beside him in an arm-chair. She must

have been sitting there for a long time, holding her breath, jealously watching the expression on his face.

"What did you say?" he asked confusedly. Her words had not sunk in.

"You find it amusing that he didn't know these simple things? But don't forget that was seven years ago!" There was growing resentment in the old woman's eyes. "If Anatoly was still alive, he would have found what he wanted. His professors said he had done a lot already. Anatoly gave his whole life to his work. You think it's funny, but I think it must have been hard for him to die, with his work unfinished, and the war not finished either. If he could only have known the war was won! And now even his work is laughed at.... You had better not read any more, young man, and ... go away...."

"No, it isn't that at all!" Alexander exclaimed, blushing with shame. "Please, for heaven's sake, forgive me, Maria Timofeyevna. You misunderstood me. Would I—"

She did not listen and left the room.

Alexander wanted to kick himself. With the haste and desperation of a man forced to throw away a great discovery, he opened the last folder. Whatever happened he must know Nikolayev's final result.

He picked up the last two pages. The first was the basic design of the rectifier.

Alexander jerked away from the desk in astonishment. He bent over it again, turned over the page, then put it back—nothing had changed. The shaded portion of the graph formed an almost exact square. What had remained as vague dotted lines in all his plans, were here drawn in a firm bold hand. He doubted his own judgement and hurriedly began to check the scale. Then in a frantic search for errors, he checked through the table on which the graph was based. Everything was correct.

Alexander looked round confusedly, almost timidly. The room was empty. He turned over the last page. Here it was, the oscillogram of the rectified current. A grey, time-faded photograph, and the line stretched across it in a ripple so faint as to be scarcely visible to the unpractised eye. It completed Anatoly Nikolayev's work as finally as a stroke of the pen under a signature.

Incredible! For the first time Alexander saw in reality what he had dreamed of for so long. It was just as incredible as somebody showing him a photograph of his dream.

Holding the paper at arm's length with his eyes fixed on it, he walked down the passage to the kitchen.

Maria Timofeyevna stood at the window with her back to him.

"Maria Timofeyevna, do you know what this is?" he asked in a hoarse delighted voice. "It's the ideal rectifier. Look at it yourself. Does that line look crooked to you? Maria Timofeyevna, do what you like with me, but I won't leave this house!"

Suddenly she burst into tears.

"Anatoly came home to me just like that once, with that photograph, and started telling me about it. And then he picked me up and whirled me round, and—"

She turned away to the window again, as though the memory had frightened her.

Now he could not miss a single line. Alexander saw how Nikolayev had approached his, Alexander's, design. He followed Nikolayev's errors and failures impatiently, forgetting he had committed even more himself. He grew frightened, as in a child's game of blindman's buff. With every experiment Nikolayev's circle of search narrowed. Nearer and nearer! The day came when Nikolayev actually produced the design of Alexander Savitsky. This was the limit. He had reached his conclusion just as

Alexander had done. Yes, this was the limit of what could be achieved by the method he had adopted. And then he wrote:

"No good. I am going back to Variant B."

It was a limit, and yet there was no limit.

Alexander rummaged for a cigarette in the crumpled packet, pulled one out and broke it in doing so; probably his fingers were trembling. He threw it away and searched for an unfinished stub in the overflowing ash-tray. A mean, almost vicious foreboding urged him to put away the papers and leave the house without reading any further. He could come back a week, a month after his thesis had been passed—the later the better.

It was as though two people were watching him. One grimly, suspiciously, from the photograph on the wall; the other, Galina Sergeyevna, from her picture taken in the days when she was called simply Galya. He could almost feel their presence, and what was more, they seemed to be looking straight into his eyes and seeing in them what he himself was afraid to admit was there.

Alexander frowned painfully.

"I won't go," he heard himself saying.

The new material made slow reading. Nikolayev's thoughts approached their goal by a difficult, tortuous path. Often Alexander had to stop and search the hasty notes for the thread that led to an unexpected conclusion; he was jealously exacting. Unconsciously he twisted his fingers under the table till the knuckles cracked. He was still waiting, still hoping to find a mistake. The tentative laboratory diagram of Variant B grew fuller every day, the bare bones were clothed in flesh. The same thing happened to it that happens to every apparatus. At first it grew more complicated, acquiring more and more subsidiary units. Its reliability and simplicity came later. It is the same with a building—harmony of

the architect's design gradually appears as the clumsy confusion of scaffolding is removed.

The day came when Anatoly Nikolayev wrote triumphantly: "Variant B is equal in power capacity to Variant A, but that is only the first stage." And, as in a race, Variant B began to overtake Variant A. And, just as in a race, when Nikolayev got well ahead, he stopped glancing back, while Alexander kept reckoning up the growing distance between them. The difference in capacity increased by twenty per cent, thirty per cent. . . . Nikolayev changed a condenser and Alexander knew without looking at the graph that he had gained another ten per cent. The final result of Variant B was twice that of Variant A. Twice as powerful!

He put them side by side in front of him. How simple and beautiful was Nikolayev's design in comparison with his own.

Twice Maria Timofeyevna came quietly into the room. He was sitting at the desk absorbed in his thoughts, and did not turn at the sound of her steps.

He imagined the store at the factory as he had last seen it. The workers would be nailing together huge crates, filling them with sweet-smelling shavings and gently lowering the frail awkwardly shaped rectifiers into them. Then he would come in carrying a light gleaming box. It would even be rather funny to see the reflection of his face in that dark glossy varnish, trying to keep as matter-of-fact as possible yet constantly breaking out into a broad grin that nothing could check. Then he would open the lid. The sound of hammers would cease and everyone would crowd round him. And then silence. How long would it last, a minute, five, ten? And he himself would be silent, overawed by the beauty of the apparatus he held in his hands.

So he dreamed, and smiled at his dreams, and soon his imagination carried him away to a distant factory

in the Urals, and there was a mechanic switching on the rectifier and saying, "Good for you, Leningrad! People with brains!" The people? He looked at the picture on the wall in front of him, with its familiar boyish face which he had studied in every feature, and which still seemed to regard him with a wary expectant glance. The people? Something swelled inside him, perhaps a thought that was only half formed, yet so generous, so happy that his heart beat faster. But at once his face clouded again, and with a start he turned his head and glanced anxiously about him.

The hands of the clock pointed to midnight. Someone had lighted the lamp on the desk and he had not even noticed it. Maria Timofeyevna was asleep on the couch with a shawl round her shoulders. A supper for two stood on the edge of the table. Maria Timofeyevna had fallen asleep waiting for him to complete his thoughts, not daring to disturb him, just as she must have done when her son was alive.

Alexander switched out the light. He closed the door quietly and firmly behind him and went down into the street. The white nights of June were beginning, and as soon as he crossed Liteiny Bridge he turned off on to the embankment. In comparison with the luminous, deserted streets the embankment was quite crowded. Lovers were leaning on the granite parapet gazing at the tow-coloured Neva. It was all so familiar, the chattering groups of school leavers, the anglers on the embankment and that clear, unfading glow spread across half the sky.

Alexander sat down on a stone seat. There was a couple sitting at the other end. A young fellow was bending forward tracing patterns with his finger on the weathered stone as he explained something to his girl-friend. With the sadness of maturity Alexander glanced at the thin sunburnt neck in its white collar, and reflected that

seven years ago Anatoly Nikolayev might have been sitting on this very seat telling Galina of his success. It was strange that he no longer had any feeling of jealousy or bitterness; he simply realized that something irrevocable had happened, something that affected his consciousness in the same way as a powerful blow in the chest affects the breathing.

With the persistence of desperation he continued to visit Maria Timofeyevna. He forced himself to recalculate all the tables in Variant B, checked every coefficient. Halfway through the day he would go back to the laboratory and test Nikolayev's circuit. A week passed. He grew thin in the face, lost weight, avoided other people and questions at work. At home and even with Natasha he was silent and withdrawn.

When he had taken the last oscillogram and compared it with Nikolayev's graph, he was convinced that their results were absolutely identical.

Had the testing of Variant B revealed some mistake he might have felt better. But the apparatus did not need his help, it worked perfectly under the most exacting conditions he could think of.

Gradually the wise simplicity of Variant B began to appear so logically inevitable to Alexander that he could no longer understand how he could have overlooked it. At the thought that he would have to defend his Variant A for his thesis, he experienced an almost physical feeling of revulsion.

At last he closed the last folder. Nikolayev's manuscript broke off abruptly, but it made no difference, the work was finished. Only the conclusions had to be stated and the whole thing put into literary form.

When he had rearranged the papers and tied them up Alexander pulled out the suit-case, opened it and paused thoughtfully.

"Maria Timofeyevna," he said without turning his head. "Let me take one of these folders, the last one. I'll return it to you in a week."

"Certainly, Alexander, take anything you need." She had got so used to him in the course of the week that she called him by his first name. Alexander gave her a sidelong glance.

"I'm taking it so that I can prepare Anatoly's work for publication," he said, pronouncing every word with an effort.

"But what about your thesis?"

Alexander shrugged his shoulders. Never in his life had he felt so depressed as the day when he closed the Nikolayevs' door behind him.

The institute had already received two of the reports of his official opponents. Indifferently he read the long and abstruse résumés of the contents of his thesis, then the appended remarks. The dry conclusion in both cases was: "Up to degree standard."

The third report, from Sazonov, he received two days before he was to defend his thesis before the Board. Refusing to analyze his motives, he had left everything undecided till he had this last report. Perhaps Professor Sazonov would consider his work unsatisfactory? And although he knew there was no hope of this, it gave him a justification for delaying his decision.

Sazonov took Alexander to task for the shortcomings in his design, but even through his reproaches one could feel the sly pleasure of a teacher who was convinced of his pupil's abilities.

As he read the report Alexander thought: "Dear old Sazonov, what a trick I've played on you. What a waste of your time! And you an old, sick man!"

He decided to go and see his adviser, Professor Mozhanov, at once.

Mozhanov lectured at several institutes, was a member of innumerable committees, commissions and societies, always seemed to be in a hurry, talked with his hat on and was not easy to catch.

Alexander waited nearly an hour in his study at the institute, staring at the pages of a magazine without realizing that he was reading nothing of what was written there.

Mozhanov entered the room noisily, tossed his overcoat on to a chair and, puffing and blowing, began to search his pockets for a handkerchief.

"What has happened to you, Alexander Ilyich?" he asked as he shook hands. "This confounded waiting has taken it out of you, I see. I was worried before my thesis, but you seem to be overdoing it. Actually, of course, it's our colleagues' wretched way of doing things that is to blame. If they get anything to review it's always three weeks. But why three weeks? They don't spend more than one evening on it anyway, but no, you must show you're a busy man. I suppose I'm the same myself. . . ."

Alexander listened patiently, he knew one had to let Mozhanov have his say. When he eventually lowered himself heavily into a chair, Alexander told him about Nikolayev's work. As soon as he showed Mozhanov the new design he forgot the purpose of his visit. Mozhanov, infected with Alexander's enthusiasm, clicked his tongue, uttered exclamations of surprise, snatched the pencil out of Alexander's hand, and interrupting each other they both began seeking and finding further proofs of the superiority of Variant B. Suddenly Mozhanov fell silent and in a rather strange manner transferred his glance from the scribbled sheet of paper to Alexander. He was only just beginning to realize what had happened.

"This is a fine mess," he mumbled confusedly. Then he tugged furiously at his tie, unbuttoned his collar, and, blowing out his cheeks, threw himself back in his chair, his whole appearance indicating that he had never expected anything else from a person like Alexander. Alexander watched his dismay with a faint smile. It was almost a pleasure to throw all the responsibility on someone else's shoulders, even if only for a few minutes.

"What the devil prompted you just before your thesis day to go in for this archaeology?" Mozhanov asked in bitter exasperation. "Now listen to me," he went on firmly. "Neither you, nor I know anything about this. Let everything stay as it was. Defend your thesis as if nothing happened. Then we'll get this Nikolayev's work into shape and publish it under his name for the institute bulletin. It will take our publishers three or four months to print it anyway."

"I thought of that, but I can't defend something that is no good."

"Nonsense! A thesis hasn't got to be a great discovery! It merely has to show the Candidate's ability for independent research."

He grabbed Alexander's arm and, dragging him to and fro across the room, tried to prove the absurdity of his doubts. His arguments were fluent. Soon Alexander ceased to understand them and was only conscious of the growing sense of weariness rising within him.

Suddenly Mozhanov glanced at the clock and, deciding the question was settled, hurriedly pulled on his overcoat, shook hands, grunted an encouraging farewell and was gone.

The same evening Mozhanov remembered the strange case of Savitsky. When he started checking his own arguments his face turned so glum that his companions noticed it. He tried to put himself in Savitsky's place and was deeply shaken when he felt the strength of the

temptation he himself would have had to overcome not to use Nikolayev's work for his own advantage.

The talk with his professor made nothing any clearer for Alexander. He weighed everything up as objectively as he could, with characteristic honesty. No, that was out of the question. Defend his thesis, then get Nikolayev's work published? He knew what that was. A trick, a bargain with his conscience, and a bad bargain, that merely concealed the desire to get a degree at all costs.

He went to his laboratory. People greeted him, asked sympathetic questions, made encouraging remarks. By his friends' faces he could see they were sincerely worried by his gloomy appearance. He took a grip on himself and even joined in the reading of a comic set of instructions for would-be thesis-writers.

Mikhail Bragin, a merry fellow who had been in the same year as Alexander at the institute, was proclaiming:

"Don't make it very long. A thesis is not *War and Peace* and you aren't Lev Tolstoi.

"Test the quality of your thesis on family and colleagues. A normal thesis should produce spontaneous yawning followed by sound sleep."

Alexander glanced suspiciously at his friends' laughing faces. Had all this been staged to get him talking?

He smacked the desk with his hand.

"I don't know how you can enjoy such cheap rubbish!" He was about to say something else, but checked himself and walked straight out of the laboratory. In the general astonishment the imperturbable Bragin was the first to recover and shouted after him: "Successful theses should be celebrated, and so should unsuccessful ones!"

His cheerful friendly voice brought home to Alexander the foolishness of his conduct, but it was too late to go back and he mentally apologized to Mikhail and the

others for his rudeness. They were good friends. Perhaps he should have asked them for advice? They could understand him better than Mozhanov. But what advice did he expect? Was not this search for advisers mere cowardice, a desire to avoid responsibility?

The humiliating thought brought him up with a jerk in the middle of the corridor. He heard a familiar patter of footsteps behind him. It was Natasha. With her hair flying back and her dress clinging to her legs she was all wind and movement.

"What do you mean by being so hysterical?" she said, and without waiting for an answer took his arm and led him along.

The main entrance to the institute opened on to a broad avenue. They walked down it and Alexander was silent. His strange apathy alarmed her and she made him sit down with her on the first bench they came to. The intense green of early summer overflowed on to the path, young branches seemed to nudge them playfully in the back.

Natasha regarded him intently. The play of shadows on her face spoke of a deep inner anxiety. He could not keep silent any longer and in painful detail he told her everything.

"I have two alternatives," he said. "The first is what Mozhanov suggested, to defend my thesis and publish afterwards; the second is to scrap the thesis and publish at once."

"Yes," she said, "there's no third way."

Alexander laughed grimly.

"There is only Variant A and Variant B."

She squeezed his fingers gratefully.

"Goodness, how complicated it all is!" she burst out. "And no one's to blame. Why, you'd wear yourself out with remorse if you agreed to Mozhanov's proposal. And

Mozhanov himself in his heart of hearts won't respect you either."

"So I'm to scrap it?"

"But why can't you think of anything else but your thesis?" Her voice was painfully bewildered. "Surely the main thing is that somebody has created a wonderful apparatus, twice as powerful as yours. Of course, it's a shame that two people worked on the same subject, and that the work of one has been wasted. And it's a shame that it's your work that has been wasted. Of course, you've learned a lot," she added wearily, "but the result—"

"There isn't one," he said harshly. "There's no result. Why go into all that again?"

"You think I don't care about what has happened to you!" Natasha clasped her hands to her breast as if defending herself from his reproach. "You silly dear! I had such hopes for your thesis. You deserved success more than many others. But you can't do it. I can't explain properly why not, but you can't."

"I'm twenty-nine," said Alexander. "Twenty-nine and still I haven't achieved anything. I keep taking and giving nothing in return. School, institute, then the war, then research. If I scrap everything and choose another subject, that means another year. All those precious minutes I saved just thrown away...."

The girl suddenly squatted in front of him and pulled his head down towards her, looking up into his face.

"You know what? Defend your thesis! But let's take a vow together that we'll give up all our days off and holidays for a year, and work in the evenings, at night if necessary, to pay off our debt and make up for the wasted year. Will that do, darling?"

Alexander stroked her hair and she could feel his fingers trembling.

"I'm afraid I can't be trusted with a debt. I couldn't even do what Nikolayev did six years ago. That can only mean that I have no talent and there's no room for me in science. And that's not the worst. The worst thing is that I long so much to become a Candidate of Sciences and be able to start working independently that I keep searching for an excuse, hesitating . . . and in the end I suppose I'm going to defend it. . . . But you were wrong about me, I *am* glad someone has made a better rectifier than mine, but I hate the idea of backing out, and then having some little squirt laughing at me behind my back and saying I couldn't make the grade. . . . You know how it is. You think I'm being petty? But the mere thought of it just tears my courage to shreds. . . ."

The girl was silent. Perhaps he interpreted her silence in his own way, probably the wrong way, for he suddenly rose and said, "I'll go now, I'm sorry but I'd like to be alone for a bit." And he strode away without looking back, leaving deep footmarks in the damp sand of the avenue.

An hour later, when Natasha returned to the laboratory, she was called to the telephone. It was Alexander, and he seemed to be a thousand miles away from her, his voice was so distant and muffled.

"I can't hear you," she repeated, frowning and blowing into the receiver. "Speak louder . . . Sasha, where are you ringing from? A call-box? What did you say?"

"I'm going to . . ." his voice reached her faintly. "I've made up my mind . . . I'm going—can you hear me?—I'm going to defend it. . . ."

While the secretary to the Board read out some brief particulars about him, Alexander forced himself to check through the diagrams hanging on the black-

board: For a second he closed his eyes and realized how bad he felt.

"Please go ahead, Alexander Ilyich," said the secretary.

He turned to face the hall, a pointer came into his hands and for another second he hesitated, dragging it away from the table as though it were glued there. Then he began speaking in a calm steady voice that sounded nothing like his own.

He watched the tip of the pointer as it moved over the diagrams, he paused in the right places, stressed the most important deductions. As he talked, his desire to get it all over as soon as possible increased. He squeezed the pointer till his knuckles were white, and forced himself to say everything he had to say.

When he had finished he put the pointer down on the table and felt a wave of relief. His opponents began their speeches. He sat down to one side and drew a sheet of paper towards him to make notes. Someone placed a carefully folded slip in front of him. He opened it, read the message and scanned the audience attentively. The window-blinds were raised and the mounting rows of desks were bathed in sunlight. The hall was crowded. Mozhanov, Bragin and several of his fellow-students were sitting in the front row. Mozhanov was scribbling with a scowl on his face as he listened to the first speech. Alexander answered his friends' anxious glances with a nod of assurance. In the rows behind several final students were craning forward nudging each other as they listened. Above them he caught sight of Natasha. She was sitting with his mother whispering in her ear with eyes fixed on Alexander. When they noticed him looking at them they both smiled encouragingly, but their smiles were so pitifully forced that he felt sorry for them.

He thought: "Mother doesn't know anything, but I

couldn't hide how I felt. What's Natasha telling her? In an hour's time—"

Natasha was wearing a new, bright-blue dress with a sailor's collar. He knew she had had it specially made for this day. He felt more depressed than ever. Particularly because his mother was present. Why had she come? He hadn't asked her, he had even said people from outside would not be admitted. He looked up at the far corner of the hall. There was the chief designer of the rectifier plant, Sergei, an old school-friend of his, and his wife. Sergei lifted his hands and made silent clapping motions. A pointless thing to do. And at last Alexander found what he was looking for.

It was a strange coincidence that they were sitting in the very place where he had sat when attending lectures as a student. They both looked nervous and unhappy and Alexander knew what had happened between them. He was sure Maria Timofeyevna had told Galina not to send him that note.

The chairman of the Board rose ponderously and read Professor Sazonov's review. It sounded unusually fresh, and every word contained something of an old-man's solicitude that was familiar to many of those present. Certain phrases that Alexander had not noticed before caught his attention: "There is an old-fashioned metaphore about placing things 'on the altar of science.' It is a very wonderful and very awe-inspiring thing when a young scientist places his first production on the work-bench of science..." And though the words were in Alexander's favour, he bent his head, as if afraid of the cruel truth they contained.

Then the chief designer of the rectifier plant got up and spoke. He praised Savitsky's thesis whole-heartedly, paid a few compliments to the young people engaged in this useful work, then with a sly twinkle in his eye made a complaint:

"Our customers are sheer gluttons. Give them power. More power. So now we come to you, cap in hand—help us to get more power."

According to him, all the institute's attention, all the post-graduates' attention should be concentrated on rectifiers. It was a matter of state importance. His words were greeted with applause.

When it came to making his concluding speech Alexander had lost all count of time. The proceedings went on in front of him like a film in slow motion.

He found himself on the rostrum again. For some reason he smoothed out his notes of the replies he had ready for his opponents as though he were actually going to answer them. Everybody waited for him to begin, but he was silent. He went up to the blackboard and raised it with a jerk. It slid upwards and on the clean board underneath he pinned two diagrams.

"The best answer to the questions of my opponents," he said as calmly as he could, "is to be found in these diagrams. They were evolved by the late Anatoly Nikolayev for his thesis in the year nineteen forty-one. Nikolayev succeeded in obtaining far better results than mine and in completely avoiding all the shortcomings that have rightly been pointed out in my own work."

He began describing Nikolayev's apparatus. Time was limited. In the few minutes at his disposal he had to prove beyond a shadow of doubt the novelty of Nikolayev's design, its reliability, quality, simplicity of manufacture, its power; he spoke in half-formed phrases, panting slightly, but now his voice was his own.

In a glance round the hall he saw the spectacles bobbing up and down on Mozhanov's perspiring nose, he saw Sergei's face, a picture of horror and dismay, the curious faces of the students, the agonized furrow across Natasha's forehead, his mother's alarm, the grateful confusion of Galina. Maria Timofeyevna was

sitting with her face in her hands, her shoulders quivering. The chief designer was leaning forward over his desk with one hand to his ear. There was a man who looked pleased!... Alexander took a deep breath and, addressing his words exclusively to the Board, explained how he had got to know of Nikolayev's work.

"I consider that in view of the circumstances my own thesis is of no value and that I cannot, therefore, claim the degree of Candidate of Sciences. It is an absurd coincidence for which no one is to blame, but it may be owing to this that we have been able to discover a genuinely valuable scientific work, an invention that the country really needs."

The chairman of the Board, known to all the electrical engineers in the Soviet Union, a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences, huge, broad-shouldered, with a leonine face, rose from his seat.

"May I ask you, Comrade Savitsky, why you did not pass the Board this information before defending your thesis?" he asked coldly.

"That has nothing to do with Savitsky," Mozhanov called out. "He told me everything and I persuaded him to go ahead, I consider—"

Mozhanov was about to say more but Alexander interrupted him.

"I had to defend my thesis to show that I had done three years' honest work as a post-graduate."

The hall was very quiet. Somebody choked back a cough behind his hand.

"I see," said the chairman. "Will the members of the Board kindly adjourn to the next room." And he was the first to lower his head and pass through the low door.

Alexander lit a cigarette and began taking down the drawings. He rolled up his and Nikolayev's separately.

Someone ran to the exit and as the door slammed and the patter of footsteps died away in the corridor

Alexander knew without looking round that it was Natasha. It had been too much for her to bear. He was so tired he could do nothing but think tenderly of her.

The members of the Board filed back on to the platform. They slowly took their places. The secretary rose on tiptoe and whispered something in the chairman's ear. The chairman grunted something, knitted his grey eyebrows, took the paper from the secretary's hand and, holding it long-sightedly at arm's length, read out the Board's decision.

The Board had resolved not to award Savitsky the degree of Candidate since his work was not original. "At the same time," the chairman read, pronouncing the words very distinctly, "in view of Savitsky's undoubted ability for independent research, and particularly in view of the fact that his own thesis would have merited a Candidate's degree had it not been for the work of Nikolayev that Savitsky himself discovered, a request will be made to the Ministry to prolong Savitsky's scholarship for another year." The Board also recommended Nikolayev's work for immediate publication.

He returned the paper to the secretary and went up to Alexander.

"Alexander Ilyich," he said quietly and all who were present rose to their feet. "You have performed a noble action and it seems to me that this, better than any successful thesis, proves to us that you will be a real Soviet scientist."

He gripped Alexander's hand in both his own and the whole hall gave vent to its feelings with furious applause.

In the lobby Alexander was surrounded by a crowd of friends, acquaintances and fellow-graduates. He saw his mother standing a little aside, anxious to approach. Everyone was a little embarrassed, not knowing what to do, what to say, so they simply stood and

smiled at him. Suddenly the crowd opened and formed a passage. Galina arm in arm with Maria Timofeyevna came up to Alexander.

"Congratulations, Alexander Ilyich," said Galina and held out a bunch of flowers.

He licked his dry lips.

"What for?" he asked hoarsely. "What are you congratulating me for?"

Galina's brows quivered and for a moment her face looked exactly as it was in the photograph Alexander had seen on Nikolayev's desk.

"You have defended my faith in people," she said so simply that no one felt her words were high-flown.

They went out all together on to the broad avenue in front of the institute. Alexander caught sight of Natasha in the distance. He ran towards her with the flowers in one hand, the rolled diagrams in the other. He stopped and was about to say something but her sad bright eyes told him that she either knew or had guessed everything.

"Natasha," he began, "you're the only one—" He did not finish. There was a hand on his shoulder. He tried to shake it off but the hand was heavy and powerful and would not let go. The chief designer of the rectifier plant was standing beside him.

"Alexander Ilyich, my dear fellow, my car's waiting. Come to the plant. I want you to look through the plans with me in detail."

Alexander dilated his nostrils.

"Look here—"

"Ah, I see! 'Go to the devil?' Is that it?" The chief designer pushed his hat over his eyes and scratched the back of his head. "All right. I'm going. But remember, tomorrow I shall be calling for you first thing in the morning."

He withdrew a few paces but turned back.

"I can't do it, old chap," he said. "Let me have just one more look at those drawings."

Alexander held out the roll of papers in silence.

The designer spread them out on the nearest bench. When he asked Alexander and the girl standing at his side to hold the drawings so that the wind would not blow them about it was no longer a request but an order. He crouched over the bench, peering short-sightedly at the drawings. His hat got in his way and he thrust it at Natasha. His exclamations and grimaces were so amusing that it was simply impossible to be annoyed with him.

Then he fell silent and straightened up.

"Excellent," he said. "Absolutely invaluable! Only—" he frowned thoughtfully, "will it do?" Then he shook his head. "No. It's not enough!"

"What's not enough?" Alexander exclaimed.

"Power. There's not enough power there! ... What are you staring at me for?" he shouted. "I told you my car's waiting. Come round the shops with me and see for yourself. Look at any newspaper you like here or in Siberia, today, tomorrow, any day! It's not enough, I tell you. Variant A, Variant B, that's all very fine, but what we want is Variant C and D, damn it! Or is that the limit?"

Natasha stood up for some reason and glanced into Alexander's face. He did not notice her and suddenly stepped round the bench and looked over the chief designer's shoulder at the drawings: "Not enough? Not enough power?" he asked in a whisper, as though groping for a sudden half-formed idea that still escaped him.

Translated by Robert Daglish

carried out by the reactionary Smetona regime. In 1906 he published a novel about the revolutionary events of 1905, entitled *The Foreman and His Sons*, and 1908 saw the appearance of *Everyday Stories*

In Soviet years Cvirka wrote numerous short stories, portraying chiefly Lithuania's past.

ONA

She was the first to rise. She swept the floors, made breakfast and then went on drudging till dark, the last in the village to put out the light. Late at night, having turned down the wick of the lamp and curled on the bench for a brief hour's rest, she would fall soundly asleep, with a ball of yarn or a half-peeled potato in her hands.

On big holidays Ona was allowed to sleep somewhat longer than usual and to tidy the corner which her masters had assigned to her in the store-room. There, among the tubs, sieves, fishing tackle and household utensils ranged along the walls, stood her cot made of boards. On the little rug nailed to the wall were pinned the two bags she had made when she tended cows: a bag for keeping hair-clips and various ornaments, and another one, shaped like an envelope and embroidered with doves. Between them was a frame made of fir-cones, with a faded crude photograph showing Ona, who stood bare-headed between two other girls, with a bunch of flowers in her hand. A magnificent palace, set among tall, spreading trees, and a canal with swans swimming in it made up the background of the picture. At the foot of the cot, by the window, stood a tall dresser covered with a white runner. Displayed prominently upon it were a pair of well-blackened boots and an old, battered

scrap-book containing mostly newspaper clippings: pictures of ladies and gentlemen, views of towns.... Between the leaves of the scrap-book Ona kept candy papers. All those objects, and the very manner in which they were arranged, breathed a wistful loneliness.

Ona did not get that corner until she began to work as a housemaid. As a labourer she had had to use a trough as a bed, with an old quilted jacket spread on its bottom. She slept in that strange bed till she was twelve. She knew want from a tender age, and she grew very slowly. Her neighbours were always laughing at her because she slept in a "cradle," and one evening she burst out crying bitterly and flatly refused to sleep in the trough any more.

Now, as she washed clothes or bathed in the trough, she often recalled her early days in the house. It had been very long ago and there were many things that had already faded from her memory.

She had spent her childhood at her aunt's, in a small cottage half-buried in the ground, close by the church. Her aunt was a skinny little woman, cleanly and nimble, with a white face that seemed bloodless. A smell of roots and apples clung to her, as it did to everything else in the house. Women were always coming to seek her advice, and she would sit and talk with them for hours about their ailments. Sometimes they dropped their voices to a whisper, glancing warily at Ona, then a little girl. The visitors brought gifts of pork, flour, butter or cheese and received in exchange roots and herbs, which Auntie took for them out of numerous packages. As she handed over the herbs she used to say:

"You'll see how well it works. Only, don't forget you must take it on an empty stomach, before you eat."

Auntie picked her roots and herbs in the fields. Those trips remained Ona's brightest childhood memories. The two of them got up early in the morning, put some

bread and cheese in a basket, locked the door and started for the country. As soon as they took the road things became jolly and exciting for Ona; at every turn they met people walking or riding, most of them knew Auntie and greeted her, and she asked them:

"How's my Benadukas doing? Is he all right? He must be quite a big boy now."

Auntie put the same question almost to everyone, the only difference being that each time she mentioned a new name. They would ask her to call on them, and she would promise to drop in to see Benadukas, or Tekliké, or Jurgutis.

After an hour's walk or so they climbed a hillock on which two windmills stood not far apart. From up there they could see the little town below, smothered in the green of gardens, with the tin-plate roof of the church glistening in the sun and with a steeple that looked like a goat's teat. Then they came to another hillock that shut out the little town and the steeple, but from its top they saw the Vengrè valley, motley with the variegated strips of fields and gardens, and the river meandering below. It was down there, in the meadows, that Auntie's working day began. While she picked her herbs and dug up, with the tip of a stick or a chip, hundreds of bulbous roots, Ona was free to run about, pick flowers or romp on the bank of the river. At noon they sat down somewhere in the shade, exhausted and drooping from the heat, and ate with relish the bread and cheese they had brought with them. But their trip did not end in the meadows, for Auntie turned into the village to have a look at "her children."

People threw open their gates and ran out to welcome her. The younger ones kissed her thin white hand and asked:

"Still digging up roots, Auntie? Do you find all you want?"

"Thanks for asking, sonny," she replied. "Yes, I find plenty. See how many I've got!" And she displayed bunches of roots and herbs, naming them affectionately one by one. The villagers treated her to the best food they could offer and gave her presents before seeing her off.

Roots were not Auntie's only livelihood; very often in the daytime or at night she would be called on to go out to the sick.

On such occasions she put pieces of linen and her pinafore into a round limewood box shaped like a small beehive and hurried off. Usually those who came to fetch her were restless and worried.

Auntie was said to bring babies to people's homes. Afterwards Ona learned that she, too, had been "brought" by Auntie. Her own mother, who had lost her husband a few months earlier, died in childbed. The little orphan, whose parents had come from distant parts, had no kin to take care of her, and Auntie gave her a home.

Auntie's death put an end to the sunny days of Ona's childhood. A mere child, she found herself serving in a sumptuous mansion with a glittering porch, countless rooms and soft chairs. At first she was enchanted by the well-dressed gentlefolk and their refined speech; but before long she had to taste the bitterness of her new life. It was her duty to look after her masters' children, who were little younger than herself. She had to carry them in turn and to gratify all their whims, and when they had gone to bed she drudged in the kitchen, washing stacks of dishes and cleaning silver. One day the mistress of the house accused her of stealing a gold ring and gave her the sack. It was a cruel injustice that left a deep scar on the child's soul. She then found a new home in the big family of the sexton, a kind-hearted man but a heavy drinker, who took pity on the girl. But before the year was out he turned her

over to Zelvys, a rich farmer, who was looking for a shepherdess.

At Zelvys's Ona had to slave for a crust of bread from the very first day, and she grew up never knowing the joys of childhood. She began by tending cows and was later promoted to housemaid. As the years wore on she grew taller and put on flesh, but her face was hardly marked by age; at eighteen and at thirty it looked much the same—a high forehead, large, prominent cheek-bones, a rather short nose and a pair of small blue eyes with an unusually warm and gentle light in them.

Great sorrow came to Ona one autumn—a bitter disappointment in her first love. She was thirty-five then and suitors had begun to court her.

The first to seek her good graces was a widowed elderly tailor, father of four. He called at Zelvys's every once in a while, but as soon as Ona knew his intentions she began to avoid him. He was short and completely bald, with an upturned moustache which he kept twirling round his finger as he told one of his stories.

"When I was making an overcoat for the count—may he rest in peace—"

Telling about the more important events of his life, he invariably began with the overcoat and finished by saying that times had changed, that nowadays people were misshapen and bandy-legged and no longer knew how to wear fine clothes—they just wasted good material by ordering all sorts of bell-bottomed trousers to keep pace with apish fashion. In the end even Zelvys was sick of the overcoat.

Another wooer was Gasparas Stūga, a fairly young, pleasant-looking bachelor who lived in the valley. He was invariably tipsy when he dropped in at Zelvys's. Being very chatty, he could talk about horses for hours—the horses he had, the stables his father had owned, the thoroughbreds he had ridden as an Uhlan. And re-

calling the days of his military service, he sometimes struck up *Uhlans, Fearless Riders*. When Ona saw him to the gate he complained to her about a bachelor's lonely life. Leaning back against the fence or stopping in the middle of the yard he took her hand and stroked it, saying, "Give your little white hand to a brave Uhlan, Onutè. Just say the word and tomorrow I'll harness up my bays!"

As soon as his head had cleared Stūga forgot all about his promise.

These suitors had only begun to call when it was rumoured in the neighbourhood that Zelvys had saved up a good dowry for Ona.

Zelvys had been Ona's guardian ever since she had entered into his service. As a shepherdess she had got no pay at all—Zelvys had said he was laying her earnings by as a dowry. When she had grown up and taken over the hardest household jobs, he told her—she was twenty-five then—that he was going to pay her an adult maids' salary. He had little difficulty in persuading her that it would be much better for her, rather than "fritter away" the money, to entrust it to his keeping, so that her dowry would grow year after year.

Ona had become attached to the Zelvyses' home as if it were her own; she was grateful for whatever she got there and it never occurred to her that she had to pay for everything with hard work.

Every year, on the second day of Christmas, Zelvys went to the store-room after breakfast and came back with a wad of bills fastened with leather straps. He sat down at the table and slowly unfolded the rags and bits of paper wrapped round the wad.

"Come here, Onutè!" he said. "Let's have a look at your dowry."

He seated the blushing, disconcerted girl by his side, spat on his forefinger and began to lay out the money.

"One hundred ... two hundred ... three ... four hundred," he said in a solemn voice. Then he covered up the rest of the money with a rag, slapped his hand down on the notes he had counted and exclaimed, "Two thousand!"

He recounted the money once more, feasting his eyes on every crisp hundred-lit bill as he held it against the light, and then, with a meaningful wink at Ona and a pat on her shoulder, he bantered, "Why, see how rich you are! Wait till the men get wind of it—there'll be no putting them off."

He took his time teasing her with suitors, promising her the finest lads in the neighbourhood for husbands, until finally she jumped up from the table.

After calculating how big Ona's dowry would be by next year and how much more she would have laid by after another five years' service, Zelvys talked about all the numerous things that one could buy with two thousand lits. Then he carefully wrapped up the money again.

His wife, who calmly watched him having his bit of fun, stepped forward and tried to catch hold of the money.

"You should give her some money, at least for the holidays. You can't just tease her with it and then—"

"Blah-blah-blah!" he cut in, pushing her hand away. "It will be safe with me. And what would she do with it? Hasn't she got all the clothes she needs, doesn't she eat her fill? Do you want her to squander it on all sorts of trash? She'll get it when she's ready to marry. I'll hand it to her cash down as in a bank."

When her master and his wife started to argue Ona slipped out into the kitchen or the yard—talk about her dowry always embarrassed her.

"What if she spends it on trash!" the mistress insisted. "That's none of your business. Let her do as she

pleases: After all, she's grown up and she, too, has a heart, poor thing. See what a screw you are! And yet you don't like it when people say you're a cheat' who wrongs his housemaid. Give her a hundred lits at least, let her get herself a warm coat or something."

"Blah-blah-blah! Sticking like a leech," he scoffed, thrusting out his elbows and covering up the money with his body. "She isn't asking for it, so she doesn't need it."

But when his wife put her arms around him and kissed him he softened. A woman's caress was the only thing that could move him, and his wife, who was none too lavish of it, resorted to it only in an emergency.

"All right, all right! You women must always have your way!" he gave in and, taking a purse with small change from his pocket, counted off five lits.

Pressed hard by his wife, he added another ten lits, hardly ever more, promising to give even a hundred provided the girl made up her mind to buy something really useful.

"Where are you, Onutç? Come in here!" the mistress called, and added in a whisper as she thrust the money into the girl's palm, "Here, buy yourself some lace."

If the girl tried to refuse the master himself spoke up in a loud voice, "Come on, don't be silly!" And he put up his hand for her to kiss.

The girl had never had any money and did not know its value; she contented herself with little and was therefore long in spending the few lits she got. She would buy herself a couple of combs, some cheap beads, and occasionally a kerchief. Her more cunning girl-friends wheedled her out of her money, which they borrowed never to return.

Ona's artlessness was taken advantage of by a young man who arrived in the village one autumn with a threshing-machine and at once won the hearts of many a wench. He said he was assistant mechanic. It was the

first time that a thresher equipped with a motor had made its appearance in the Vengrè valley.

One morning a team of eight horses hauled the thresher over the muddy and rutted road, amidst shouts and much whip-cracking. A crowd pressed round the machine though many had already seen it, for it was the third autumn that the thresher had been travelling from village to village in that neighbourhood. The people of the Vengrè valley, wary and slow to accept new-fangled devices, at first refused to hire the machine. They did not warm to it until it had been used by the more well-to-do in the first year and tried by the less affluent next year, all of them praising the efficiency of the machine and the little expense its use entailed.

The owner of the machine, who lived permanently in town, had hired a mechanic, who in his turn had brought a dashing assistant with him.

The assistant mechanic was as genial and companionable as his chief was sullen and unsociable. When the machine had set to work in the first Vengrè farmer's yard and people got together to lend a hand, everyone already knew and used the young man's name—Anatolis—and he in his turn called everybody by his name.

He bustled cheerfully about the threshing-floor, hurrying from one store-room to another, feeding sheaves into the thresher, shovelling off the grain from under it, laughing as he snatched the caps off the heads of the boys gaping at the motor and held them against the powerful air current gushing from the pipe.

"Halloo, Anatolis!" the girls would call from the top of a straw stack they were piling up. The next moment Anatolis would be on the stack, undaunted by the pitchforks raised threateningly against him and foiling attempts to push him off, and he would spin the girls round one by one and heap straw upon them. Then, tumbling down to the ground, he would fly about the threshing-

floor again, wedge himself into a new group, exchange a few words with everyone, relieve elderly people at the machine so that they could smoke a pipe.

Before the second day was over the new method of threshing, but above all the gay newcomer, had stirred up the youth of Vengrè. Boys in their teens volunteered to help.

The machine droned and puffed in the valley all through the week, from early morning till dark, and finally died down on Saturday afternoon, having threshed half the village's harvest.

On Sunday the girls kept asking each other as they talked about that evening's dance:

"Is Anatolis coming?"

"Has anyone asked Anatolis?"

Anatolis gave preference to none of the girls but was equally friendly to all, and he did not leave out Ona, either. He had embraced her once or twice in the store-room, then on the straw stack. Once he had even tried to kiss her, but she hid her face in her hands and stuck out her elbows to keep him off.

"Go on with your bristly face!" she had said. "Try it on somebody else."

She considered herself past the age when she could appeal to young men and, anyway, she had never taken the advances of chaps like Anatolis seriously. She therefore laughed off his attempted caress.

Be that as it may, that autumn at threshing time young and old alike got together in one big, well-knit family; from dawn till dark the cheerful voices of the workers came ringing through the drone of the machine, and Ona, too, felt uplifted as she had hardly ever felt before. Many of those who had known her as a quiet and bashful girl were surprised at the change, wondering where so much wit and go, and even boldness, came from.

It was a pleasure to watch Ona beat Anatolis who had challenged her to compete with him at the thrasher. He had decided to wear her out and did his utmost to overwhelm her with the sheaves which he threw to her to be fed into the machine. And indeed he had the better of her at first—the sheaves were piled about her, shoulder-high. But then, removing the sheaves one by one, she cleared the ground about her faster and faster, and soon it was she who urged him on as she demanded more sheaves. Feeling tired, he discarded his waistcoat and struggled on for some time in his shirt-sleeves while everybody looked on, but finally had to give up, utterly exhausted.

From then on Ona was a match for any young man. Seeing that she was the most quick-witted of them, the girls made her their leader. In the evenings, after brushing their clothes, washing, having their supper and resting a little, the young people met to sing and dance, and then Ona took the lead in getting up the fun. In the game of “geese” her girl-friends always asked her to be the “gander.”

Ona would straighten up and plant her broad feet on the clay floor. Then, biting her lower lip and thrusting out her short, brawny arms menacingly, she would lead her flock—a file of girls holding on to each other—like a real gander, trying at every step to bar a “wolf’s” way. More often than not even the quickest of the young men had a hard time trying to catch one of her “geese.”

One evening, when threshing was finished for the day, the girls sat cracking nuts, waiting for the accordion-player to come from the village. Anatolis asked each of them for a nut, and then snatched away all of Ona’s handful.

“That’s unfair!” cried the girls.

“Can you tell me who plays fair nowadays?” Anatolis retorted, drawing near Ona. “The girls gave me

so many promises, but they never kept their word. They all lied to me and some of them even set their dogs on me."

"You choose the wrong time and the wrong place to take your walks, that's why the dogs come at you," said Ona, edging away from Anatolis.

"I think I chose the right time—"

"When it was dark, eh?" the girls prompted.

"Why, no—the moon was shining!" replied Anatolis.

"Just like a prowling cat. Take your walks in the daytime when the sun's shining and when there are people around, then you'll have no reason to complain," Ona taunted him again.

The other girls laughed and began to mock him harder still.

He moved closer to Ona and took her hand.

"Let me see if you've got a nice ring."

"Why don't you buy her a nicer one?" commented one of the girls.

"If I ever bought any it would only be for Onutè—a pretty ring for each of her fingers," he replied.

It was now rather dark in the house; the older women had gone to the other room, taking the light with them. It was only the men's cigarettes that flickered now and then.

Ona felt Anatolis move closer to her and, still holding her hand, nestle to her in a meaningful way. She sprang to her feet and cried as she heard the accordion strike up outside. "Here he is!"

That evening, walking home past the Vengrè copse, Ona heard a hurried footfall behind her. It was Anatolis. He told her he was going to the elder's to spend the night because the thresher was to work there on the following day. For a while they talked about the elder and how many days Anatolis would have to stay with

him. Then Ona began to calculate when her master's turn would come and how many cartfuls of grain had already been brought in. Both were glad to realize that it would be at least another week before the thresher left the village and the valley. Thus they walked on side by side, talking about everyday matters. He asked her how long she had been in Zelvys's service. Both of them marvelled at the autumn night, which was as warm as in summer, and at the clear weather lasting so long. Indeed, even though it was autumn, the copse smelled of the dry moss heated during the day. When they came out into the field they saw, stretching away into the distance, the white, well-beaten path zigzagging uphill, and beyond the hill the boundless October sky glittering with big stars. They heard loud talk and shouts coming from the road across the river, then the bridge gave a low rumble, and presently they could make out a high, dark object crawling over the hill-side—the thresher on its way to the elder's.

Near Zelvys's house they saw something black lying across the path. Ona, though by no means faint-hearted, started back, and before she knew it her hand was in Anatolis's. The dark object turned out to be a dog—probably a homeless one; it jumped up at once and slunk away as Anatolis cursed it. Ona's fright was instantly over, but Anatolis did not let her hand go, and after they had walked on hand in hand for a while he tried to embrace her. She tried to break free, but he twined his arms about her in a tight embrace, pulled her close to him and kissed her.

It all came so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that Ona, who had never experienced anything of the kind in her life, did not quite understand what was happening. Before she knew it she was at home. She shut the door behind her with a bang and stood for a long time leaning against it in a torpor, her heart thumping vio-

lently. She heard the sound of receding footsteps, and melancholy and regret gripped her heart; she would have liked to catch up Anatolis. Soon her whole being was overcome by a sweet languor, and tears of happiness rolled down her cheeks.

Without undressing she dropped on her bed and lay hushed and sleepless till dawn, staring at the ceiling.

She was spellbound throughout the next day; she worked without quite realizing what she was doing and answered questions without knowing what she said; and when she met Anatolis she did not dare look him in the eyes. But he had changed too; seizing an opportunity he talked to her in such terms as if they had already travelled a long way together. She wavered, full of misgivings, and did not believe in her happiness until after Anatolis had repeatedly made what seemed to her an ardent confession.

All of the following days, while the thresher worked on the Zelvys farm and Anatolis hung about the place, spending the nights in the house, merged for Ona into one unending day of joy. They had decided to get married immediately after Hallowmas or after the first autumn frosts. At first they would have to rent a room somewhere because Anatolis said he had fallen out with his father, a shopkeeper, who had a small house in Kaunas. His father had tried to marry him against his will to a pock-marked American who was made of money. If he had married her, he said, he would no longer be tending a thresher but would be driving in a private car; but he would not force his heart and so had renounced his inheritance and left his parents, becoming an ordinary workman. His father was sure to repent, he said, and would forgive him when he knew how happy his son was with Ona.

Having finished his story, Anatolis said he was worried about the rings and other necessities of the wed-

ding. Since he had no savings, he said, he would probably have to borrow a dark suit and hat. He seemed very unhappy about it and suggested putting off the wedding for a few months. Ona, who now felt not only happy, but also rich, gladly undertook to arrange everything.

It was not until after much coaxing by Ona that her future husband consented to borrow some money from her, forbidding her, however, to let it out to anybody that they were going to get married. He said that if his father got wind of his taking an ordinary working woman for wife he would come rushing from town and upset the whole thing. They would get married on the quiet, without putting up the banns. That would also cost some money, he said, because they would have to get an indult from the bishop.

For the first time Ona had to ask her master for money, and what money! It was a question of three hundred lits, or almost her yearly pay.

When she told him what she wanted Želvys stared at her wide-eyed, and then began to press her with questions. What did she want so much money for? Did she by any chance need it for her wedding? Ona very nearly confirmed his mocking conjecture, but fearing above all else that thereby she might give rise to gossip or even jeopardize her happiness, she checked herself and held her tongue. She gave no reasons at first, but as Želvys pressed her she lost her composure, and this goaded him to question her harder.

"What do you want it for? Do you realize what a sum it is? Why, for three hundred lits you could buy a three-year-old colt! This year I couldn't make three hundred lits even on fifteen *purs* of wheat. And even if I needed it today I couldn't have it—I haven't got a cent, I've lent out all my money. No, no! You can't be in your right mind, my girl. Three hundred lits—good God!"

The old miser ran out of strong words, but Ona did not give in; indeed, she began to lie, something which she had never done before. Tearfully she told him that she had stones growing in her liver, causing her terrible pain and interfering with her work. She had been ill for a long time, she said, but had borne it up, hoping that it would pass. She also told him about a doctor who, she said, was willing to dissolve the stones for three hundred lits with expensive medicines. She lied so artfully and cried so convincingly that Želvys gradually calmed down, his angry eyes lighting up with compassion.

"Now see what you've done, my girl," he said. "Why didn't you tell me at once? You shouldn't have borne it up for so long. All right, now, let's think it over, let's discuss it—something has to be done."

The idea of the liver-stones had been suggested by the tailor's stories. Besides the story of the overcoat, the widower liked to tell about the stones that had grown in the count's liver. He said that some of those stones the doctors had dissolved by means of expensive medicines and the rest they had extracted by ripping up the count's belly. They had turned out to be as big as duck's eggs, he said. The count had died just the same, he said, because the doctors were unable to extract the last stone.

To the simple-minded maid and her master, who, too, had heard the tailor's stories, the disease seemed strange and terrible.

Želvys was moved to compassion by purely practical considerations. Ona's "illness" worried him only in so far as it could interfere with her work in his household.

"It's bad, very bad," he muttered. "It wouldn't have been so bad if it had come in winter, but there's so much work to do just now!"

He kept on dallying with the money. He would scratch his ear, knit his eyebrows and ask her again and again where she felt the pain, whether the fits came often and whether she was sure it wasn't just flatulence. Was it the doctor who told her she had those stones? When he heard that she had called on Dr. Sugintas his face clouded.

"That boy, that milksop!" he thundered. "What does he know? His beard hasn't sprouted yet, but there he is fleecing people already!"

Ona made bold to put in a word.

"He doesn't charge anything for the treatment, Sir, because I'm only a labourer. He's a very nice doctor. It's the medicines that cost such a lot of money. They come from abroad."

"Blah-blah-blah! Why not use some other medicine—roots or something? You should go to the surgeon's, at least he doesn't charge so much."

The "surgeon" was an old man with a parted grey beard, and Želvys, who had never sought medical aid in town, believed that none but an old and bearded doctor could know anything about diseases.

"Three hundred lits for some watery stuff. He'll dissolve the stones, will he? Why, I'd much sooner put on a shroud and die!"

He would confer with his wife and then call Ona again and suggest that she should go to a leech. And he did not surrender and pay the money until Ona, feigning an attack during one of those talks with him in the store-room, collapsed on a heap of wheat and began to rake the grain with hands and feet, screaming at the top of her voice.

That same day the money was in Aratolis's pocket. He promised that in the morning of the last Sunday in October he would be waiting for her in the Vengrè copse,

beside the oak-tree with the holy image on it. From there they were to go to the priest.

That momentous meeting, which would seal Ona's fate, was still two weeks off. Two weeks of impatient waiting, and then the whole village, the whole parish, all her girl-friends, would learn the big news.

One cloudy morning the thresher left the valley, and with it went Anatolis. With the familiar drone of the machine gone, the valley grew as still as an abandoned beehive. To many of those who had had a good time doing a common job and had got to know each other in the hustle and bustle of work, and above all to Ona, that silence seemed particularly melancholy.

But the thresher was not dead. At first they thought it was the habitual noise of the machine still echoing in their dulled ears, but soon it became evident that the thresher was actually working somewhere in the distant villages. Its low drone, which filled up all of the autumnal space, could be heard for another week, and from a hill-top one could see more and more straw stacks going up above the house-tops far away.

Whether feeding the cattle in the yard or sitting on the house steps in the evening, Ona listened for that noise, trying to guess from what direction—east or west—it was coming and in which village her beloved was working just then. She recalled one by one the days she had spent with Anatolis, that starlit night when he had first kissed her; she thought she saw his smile and heard his voice, and the distant hum of the machine was like a ringing bond that linked the two of them together.

To make Zelvys believe that she really needed the money for medicines, Ona made several trips to town, bringing some bottles with her each time.

On the Sunday fixed for the meeting she donned her best, put on all the beads she had and her brand-new boots, and was in the copse, under the oak-tree, well in

advance of the appointed hour. The forest now seemed different from what it had been on the night when they first met. The ground was saturated with moisture, the wet, muddy leaves stuck to her feet, and a bleak, sodden sky looked down through the bare boughs.

The meeting-place was not a happy choice—a path wound past the oak-tree, and again and again Ona had to hide from people on their way to town. She did not know the exact time, but she could tell by the sun, which peeped occasionally through the clouds, that it was well after midday. Finally the stream of passers-by ran out, but still there was no sign of Anatolis. She began to fret—she walked back and forth, peering from the hill-side into the surrounding fields. Every man's shape that loomed in the distance kindled new hope in her, but not for long. Still hoping that Anatolis would come, she waited till dusk, straining her eyes and walking up and down till her feet hurt. Her light boots were soaked, her silk kerchief was wet with the moisture dripping from the branches. That morning, to kill the time somehow, she had broken some ferns and junipers, adorned the image on the oak and said several times over all the prayers she knew. And in the afternoon she had watched with growing apprehension the sun dipping fast westwards.

Walking back home, she hardly saw her way through the tears, and covered her face with her kerchief whenever she met anyone. Having cried her fill, she calmed down—after all, Anatolis might have fallen ill or mixed up the date, or something else might have happened. This hope lasted her till next Sunday, but as he did not show up even then she no longer knew what conjecture to cling to or where to seek comfort. She could neither eat nor sleep; sometimes she thought she was going mad, then she would light a hallowed candle and purify herself with its smoke. Her grief and pain grew deeper

when she heard that after leaving the Želvys farm Anatolis had bought a bicycle for a hundred and fifty lits from the elder's labourer.

Ona realized that she had been deceived cruelly and trifled with. She cursed the money again and again, wishing that her master had never saved it and that people had never heard anything about it.

Afterwards she learned from her girl-friends that Anatolis was not at all a shopkeeper's son but the nameless love-child of the spinner Kotrė from Stirniai. After military service he had worked as a navvy, then as a raftsmen on the Niemen, and had got his job with the thresher but recently.

Blows such as these kept hailing upon Ona's poor head for quite a long time. Shortly after Hallowmas, when the first snow had fallen, a stranger brought her a letter. All she found in the envelope was fifty lits wrapped in a piece of newspaper. The stranger told her that the sender was Anatolis. He said Anatolis was very sorry for what had happened, and as for the rest of the debt, he would pay it back soon.

The message made Ona wish she could drop dead there and then. She felt faint with the unbearable weight of the money in her hands, her legs grew numb and she could not think of an answer to give to the man.

Her eyes, so often red from crying, betrayed her misery and drew Želvys's attention. Besides, he found the stranger's visit suspicious and once again began to harass his housemaid with questions.

The distressed girl almost betrayed her secret when the old man said:

"What sort of disease is that, anyway? You don't eat anything, you look awful, and you do nothing but cry. Has that rascal of a mechanic got anything to do with it by any chance? Come on, out with it!"

But staunchly she denied it, invoking God, and once

more succeeded in allaying his suspicions. However, that did not make her plight any more bearable, for the mistress had taken her treatment into her own hands. She sent the girl to quacks and "wonder-doctors," made her drink potions and bathed her in formic acid. Some said that her illness had been caused by fright, others attributed it to overwork, and as a result of their efforts she fell ill in good earnest. The home remedies that had been crammed down her throat made her retch for several days. For nearly a month she could hardly swallow anything; she had lost her good looks, her cheeks were sunken and her hands shook so violently that she could barely button her jacket.

Her heart wounds were slow to heal. However, when the winter had dragged by and spring came, she recalled them as no more than a nightmare.

Once in a while she heard something about Anatolis. They said that he often rode on his bicycle to the elder of Tverkiai, whose youngest daughter had just finished a school of housekeeping, was very good at making cakes and could lay the table in town style. At parties Anatolis never left her side, they said; she wore white gloves and had a dark beauty-spot on her chin and when the orchestra struck up a polka or a *suktinis*, she would make a wry face and say, "I can't dance that! Ask them to play a tango!"

One day, they said, somebody had seen Anatolis drinking with the elder, who called him his "dear son-in-law."

Spring and summer fled by, with all their usual drudgery and cares. When autumn came threshers set to work again. Their low drone grew louder and louder as they drew nearer, rousing a vaguely painful echo in Ona's heart.

One morning the thresher that was already so familiar to many appeared in the Vengrè valley, drawn by a

team of six. With a pang Ona saw the machine come rolling majestically up the village road. Anatolis, now a full-fledged mechanic, was in charge.

She braced herself and pretended to be as carefree as her girl-friends. There was no avoiding a meeting with Anatolis, even though she kept away from the machine at first, saying that she was still too weak after her illness. But as soon as the thresher arrived at the Zelvys farm she ran into Anatolis, who seemed to be looking for her. She found him manlier now and more tanned than when she had seen him last, and not quite as handsome as before. She tried to slip past him into the threshing-barn, but there he was, barring her way and shyly calling her by name. Apologizing for not giving her his oil-smeared hand, he grinned and winked sheepishly at her.

Throughout that day he seemed to be seeking an opportunity to meet her in a secluded spot where nobody could disturb them. She avoided such a meeting, taking care not to part from her girl-friends for a moment.

Towards evening, while working in the store-room, Ona through a crack in the wall saw Anatolis and a few other young men slip behind the cow-shed. There they huddled together and she saw a bottle go the round. Then Anatolis went back to the machine. And at once his cheerful voice rang out again, filling the whole threshing-barn with his presence, as it were.

Night was falling. There were just a few more sheaves left, and the workers redoubled their efforts, seeing that the job would soon be finished. Everybody was in a cheerful mood; some were sweeping the floor, others were raking up the grain, still others, their work over, stepped outside to brush their clothes. Someone struck up a song, someone else joined him, then more people followed suit, and the melody resounded with full force. Ona, who in the meantime had come out of the emp-

ty store-room, was piling a few last armfuls of straw on the stack. The first stars lit up in the sky.

Suddenly a piercing shriek rent the air, drowning the rumble of the machine. The workers broke off their song. A few of them darted out of the darkness and into the barn. The inhuman shriek rang out again and again. Sensing a frightful accident, Ona collapsed on the stack. Shouting and waving their arms, men rushed out of the barn door, which seemed to her like the maw of a monster. Their faces were livid with horror, they behaved like madmen. With a last terrible roar the thrasher stopped. Presently, stooping as they moved almost at a run, a group of men carried something outside, put it down on the ground, and pressed even closer round it.

From the top of the stack Ona saw a face lit up by the last glow of the dying day, and losing consciousness, feeling as if she were hurtling down lower and lower, faster and faster, she fell back in the straw.

It was some time before she came to, with but a dim recollection of what had happened. People were still shouting on the Zelvys farm, lights were moving up and down the yard. Then some women rushed out of a house, carrying pillows. Soon a cart pulled up at the barn, the man who had been lying on the ground, wrapped up in sheets, was lifted on to it, and the cart pulled away.

It was Anatolis, who towards the end of the threshing had gone to the machine to feed sheaves into it and had stumbled and got his feet caught in the wind-beater.

Ona lay on the stack for a long time without shedding a single tear, feeling nothing but an infinite emptiness inside her.

Later word came from town that Anatolis had recovered but would for ever be a cripple, having lost both legs.

The news caused Ona great anguish. Gradually the idea got hold of her mind that the terrible misfortune was a punishment which God in his anger had meted out to Anatolis for having wronged her. She believed that the Almighty had wreaked his vengeance at Zelvys's and not elsewhere because he had wanted her to witness it. She became more and more firmly convinced of this and one day, even before the news of the unfortunate young man's fate had reached the village, she vowed in the Vengrè copse, in front of the oak-tree, to buy an image of St. Ona, her patron saint, for the parish church, in order that the saint might solicit from the Lord a little corner in heaven for the poor mechanic's soul. If Anatolis recovered, she vowed never to forsake him.

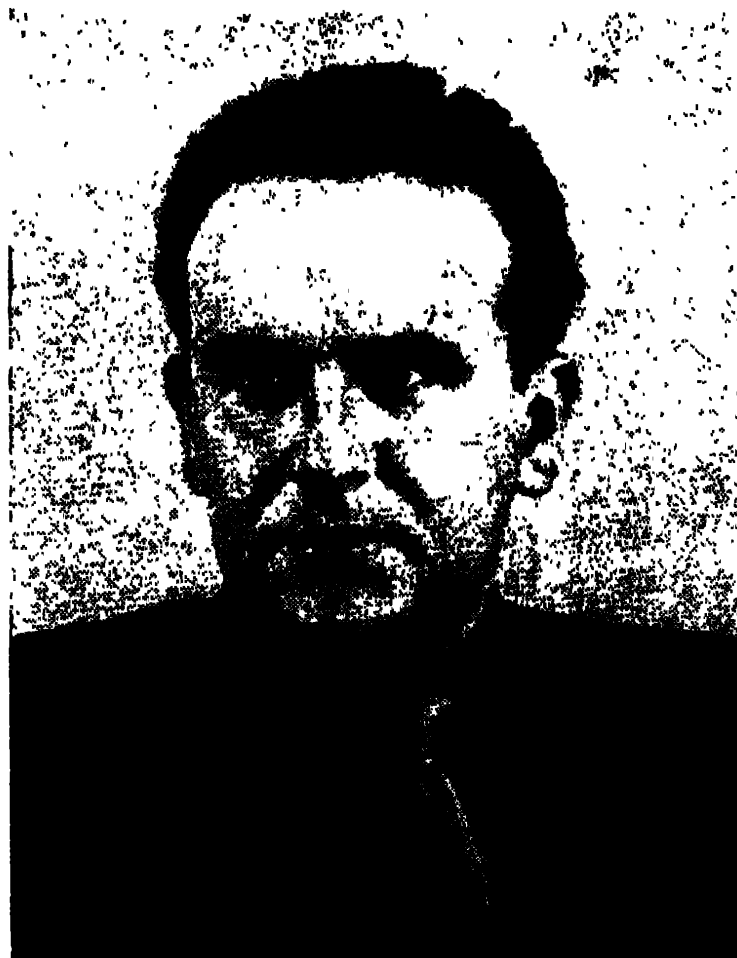
After spending another winter at Zelvys's, Ona left the valley for good. She had quarrelled with her old master over Anatolis—Zelvys refused to give food and shelter to the cripple.

Tramping from village to village and earning a living as a day-labourer or laundress, Ona never parted with the cripple, pushing him along in a cart almost as small as a pram. While she rinsed the laundry in a river or loaded a cart in the field, the cripple sat near by in a boat or in the shade of a rye stack, making a basket of osiers or carving something of wood.

When people asked her why she dragged the legless man about with her instead of leaving him at home, she would reply:

"He's closer to my heart this way."

Translated by S. Apresyan



YANKA BRYL

Byelorussian Author

Two young people who loved one another dearly came to the parting of the ways: they were Galya, a black-eyed farm girl, and Seryozha Yurochka, a jolly accordion-player. Galya's dreams were shattered, her heart was broken, for she had lost the thing she held dearest—her love—and with it all joy in life. This is the story of Galya and the tragedy of unrequited love.

Yanka Bryl was born in 1887, his father was a railwayman. His homeland—the western part of Byelorussia—had for years been under Poland's imperialist rule. The invaders called that region, where the people led a life full of hardships, their "eastern outskirts." The Byelorussian language was banned, and one after

another all the Byelorussian schools, clubs, theatres, libraries and publishing houses were closed down.

In those epoch-making days of September 1939 the boundary line running through the country, which had been forced on the Byelorussian people, was destroyed for ever. Yanka Bryl then became a portrayer of the life of his people, in his own way a chronicler of Western Byelorussia. His stories are moving and lyrical, filled with love and respect for people, their actions and feelings, written with all the beauty and subtle understanding of his native tongue.

GALYA

In the days of the gentry, it was a farmstead. There were six dessiatines of good fields immediately beyond the orchard, a big new threshing-floor, two cow-houses, and a little cottage built in the old style. The thatched roof, sloping on four sides and green with moss, hung low over the tiny dim windows so that the cottage frowned at the world like its master, old Danka Khamenok, whose head seemed to have grown into the shabby old winter hat which, if he was to be believed, had once been an astrakhan hat bought in the city.

That hat was now somewhere in the attic, while Danka Khamenok lay buried on a grassy hillock under the pines. All that remained of the farmstead was the orchard, a creaking sweep over the framework of the well, and the small cottage.

Of the Khamenok family only the daughter-in-law, Galya, and her children, a boy and a girl, now lived in the cottage.

It was a serene evening in August. The sun had set. The leaves on the crown of the old linden-tree behind the kitchen-garden had lost their glow and the starlings had flown away, taking their noisy chatter to the village. After the evening milking the cow lay on a bed of fresh straw under a shed near the porch. Galya's son, Antos, had gone to the thresher in the field. In the cottage, black-haired little Sonechka was sitting at the table and washing down a piece of bread with fresh milk. Her thin, tanned legs were covered with stubble scratches, like those of all children who tended cattle. She had

washed them in cold water from the well, and now they were tingling all over. Sitting on a bench, she kept rubbing them against each other and swinging them.

Sonechka was in a talkative mood.

"Mummy," she said, "Lyonya Stepanov teased me today. 'You're gentry,' he said. 'You own a farmstead.' Why did he say that? Why did he laugh at me?"

Galya was leaning against a small cupboard, half sitting on it. On the wall above her head was an old clock with some foreign word on its dusty face. In the many years that it had been hanging here no one had bothered to find out what it meant. But then, only the menfolk and Galya knew how to tell the time. Her mother-in-law had lived seventy years without ever thinking of the date, let alone the time. The minute-hand had fallen off during the war and the hour-hand had stopped two or three weeks ago.

It was harvest time and Galya's arms, tanned to the elbows, were aching with weariness. She felt as if she was still in the field. Heavy sheaves, bound by nimble fingers, passed endlessly before her eyes, piling up on the stubble. The rattle of the reaper, words, snatches of song, laughter, the murmur of the rye and the rustle of straw still echoed in her ears.

"Mummy, why?"

Galya tried to remember what her daughter had been saying.

"Why what?" she asked, puzzled.

But Sonechka provided the answer herself. "He said they live in the village and we live on a farm," she mumbled, her mouth full. "He said Grandfather and Father were gentry and that I am, too."

"Tell him he's a foolish boy," Galya said in a tired, dull voice.

She wanted to add something, but stopped. Again her ear caught the hubbub that for a moment had died

away. Again, as she stood here under the clock, part of her seemed to be still out in the fields.

"Get on with your supper, dear," she said. "Finish it quickly. It's time you went to bed."

"Are you going anywhere, Mummy?"

"I'll soon be back."

Beyond the cherry-trees Galya stopped and leaned with her hands and breast against the grey cross-bar of the old fence. She looked out over the fields, her gaze fixed somewhere far, far away, her feet wet with the cold dew. Grasshoppers were chirping in the sea of wheat, spreading out from the cherry-trees. Farther off to the right stood great piles of flax still warm with the sun and as fragrant as freshly crushed oil-seeds. High above the wheat, the flax and the rich calm earth floated the full, contented moon.

But all this was nothing, it was all meant to carry the distant drone over the fields. Somewhere out there he was sitting behind the steering-wheel, he, to whom alone she longed to cry with all the pain in her heart, with all her deep sorrow:

"Ser-yo-zha-a! Ser-yozh-a-a dear!"

He had long ceased to be Seryozha,* and become Sergei. He had probably long forgotten, erased from his memory, all thought of the past. And you, foolish one, you can cry your heart out thinking of the days long gone by....

There had been a time when he was Seryozha for her. But that was long, long ago! No, no, it seemed only yesterday.

Galya was just growing out of girlhood when two burly, morose brothers, who made their living tailoring sheepskin coats, came to their village of Garositsa from Kostyuki. Both wore fine sheepskin coats, as though to

* *Seryozha*—intimate and diminutive form of *Sergei*.—Tr

disprove the old saying that a shoemaker always goes barefoot. Both wore huge hats that seemed to have been made of whole sheepskins, both were in bast shoes and both had moustaches.

"Look, girls. The Torbas are here!" cried one of the girls spinning tow, as she glanced out of the window.

The tailors were Tymokh and Tikhon Torba and people who did not know them well could never tell one from the other.

"And there's a lad with them, girls! My, but he's handsome! And he's got an accordion!"

And true enough, the tailors had a young fellow with them—a mere boy. He wore a short jacket, top-boots, and had an accordion slung over his shoulder. One of the girls rapped on the window with her spindle. He must have heard it, for he turned and waved a "Good-day" to them with a laugh.

He might have come in, but one of the Torbas, the one carrying a yardstick, also looked round, said something and the lad moved on. The girls, and everybody else in the village for that matter, thought it strange that one of the Torbas should have such a son—so fair, so well-knit, so unlike these two burly, moustachioed brothers.

He turned out to be their nephew, an orphan from a distant village. His name was Sergei, and his surname—Yurochka*—was as odd as that of his uncles, but it suited him. So some people called him Seryozha and others, Yurochka.

What a gay, attractive lad he was, that Yurochka! His uncles, big as they were, could settle down in the smallest cottage. They would take off their hats and sheepskin coats and, with only their moustaches to uphold their dignity, set to work, breathing hard over their

* *Yurochka*—intimate and diminutive form of *Yury*.—*Tr.*

sheepskins. They were a silent pair. But for Yurochka no room was too big. Not for him alone, of course, but for him and his accordion. Sometimes his patience would not last till the evening; he would stick his needle in his shirt, wind the thread round it, glance at his uncles and reach for his accordion. He liked to have his things in order. His accordion was not kept any old way; it was always wrapped up in his aunt's shawl. He would untie the shawl and there his accordion would be, polished and shining. The moment he started playing the room would seem to grow bigger.

He would play a dance, then another, and his uncles would listen in silence. Then the elder Torba, Ty-mokh, the one who always carried the yardstick, would remark in his deep bass:

"Maybe that's enough, Sergei? Maybe people don't like it?"

Yurochka's reply would be to swing from a waltz to *Mikita*.

That would instantly bring the spirit of youth into the room. The girls, well, they were always ready to spring up from their seats and go into a whirlwind dance, their wide skirts flying. The master himself, if not too old, would start beating time with his foot. Even the grandmother, so old that she could remember the *corvée*, would peer down from her bed on the Russian stove.... And Yurochka would shake his forelock and sing:

*Mikita milks the cow
And his missus feeds the sow
Mikita! Mikita!
Put a skirt on, Mikita!*

A fine, ringing voice he had, that accordion-player.

His uncles were the only ones to listen in silence, without even pausing in their work. But you would

hardly say they were not enjoying it, especially if you knew that it was they who had bought the accordion for Sergei.

That had been a gay month in Garositsa. They had dances every evening. It was a pity there were not enough sheepskins to keep them there the whole winter!

Yes, it had been a wonderful time for everybody ... for Galya especially.

But that was all long ago.

Now, the full moon was shining peacefully over the field. Galya's feet were wet with the cold dew, and her shoulders chilled under her thin frock. The tractor rumbled on in the distance. How could she forget the days when Seryozha was *her* Seryozha? How bitter, how painful was the knowledge that they were gone! They were now a part of the past—the days when they loved each other ardently, kissed so passionately. It lasted for only a week, and a week has but seven nights.

Galya was the first to fall in love. She was afraid to admit it even to herself, ashamed to look at him too often lest people might notice and guess her secret. She was the youngest of the girls, an orphan. Her mother, the poorest woman in the village, had always been called Marila the Farmhand. Galya had never known her father. Perhaps he was alive today, never even dreaming he had a daughter. Sometimes in her childhood the boys would hurl the scathing epithet "bastard" at her, but as time passed, the name fell away like husks from grain. Galya grew up to be very lovely, and, as the old song goes, this loveliness was all the poor orphan had. Her hands and feet were small and shapely, her fine black eyebrows arched over large brown eyes, her red kerchief, with golden ears of wheat embroidered on it, was tied in a special way over her thick, raven locks. There was something exquisite in her sweet modesty

and that made the village lads lose their heads. And when Galya danced, you could not tear your eyes off her!

At first Yurochka too just looked at her and tirelessly played on his accordion. Everybody likes to dance to good music, but for a long time there was no one who could take Seryozha's place. One Sunday, however, Styopka Chernogreben, a good hand at the accordion, came from a neighbouring village. Styopka had no accordion of his own at that time. Yurochka placed his new one on the lad's knee and, smiling politely, asked, "How about a polka?" "All right, I'll try," the other replied readily.

Styopka started to play. Not so well as Sergei, but the polka *Galka* went off with a swing.

Yurochka tossed his head, shook himself like a sparrow released from the hand, settled his belt over his embroidered shirt and made his way to the corner where the girls were sitting. The crowded room watched eagerly to see whom he would choose, and the girls waited with shining eyes and beating hearts—"He's coming to me..." But Seryozha went straight to Galya. He bowed, with his usual simplicity and ease, and then looked at her with a smile that was both happy and appealing. "This is our dance, at last!"

They stepped out into the circle and took each other's hands.

Yurochka, his face glowing, waited for the beat, then stamped and whirled. At times his feet seemed barely to touch the floor, at others, on a turn, they beat out a sharp tattoo. Beside his fair hair, the rosy face framed in the red kerchief flashed by, but not fast enough for the others not to see the golden ears of wheat on the red background, the black eyebrows, and the lips that could not hold back a bashful, happy smile. Everybody saw it and Yurochka better than the others.

"Keep back!" shouted the lads, though not one of them thought of going into the dance himself.

But the circle round the dancing pair grew smaller as those at the back pressed forward.

Grandfather Roman Kruglyak climbed on a bench in his *valenki* and stood with a hand raised, ready to join in with a wild shout of delight.

As though feeling this general admiration, Yurochka broke into the song:

Little jackdaw,
Little jackdaw,
You are mine,
You are mine!...*

There were shouts of "Right, Yurochka! Right!" A sense of lightness filled the cottage and only then, as though feeling that everything was now all right, did the other young people join in the dance.

It was only the prelude to the great happiness which was to come, which was born that night, when he kissed her again and again by the window and Galya, covering her face with her hands, whispered:

"Don't, Seryozha dear, don't...."

But he had no difficulty in parting those hands, and though they stood there in the snow until it was nearly daybreak they could not drink their fill of happiness, of ardent, intoxicating happiness.

A week later Yurochka and his uncles returned to Kostyuki. Who could have thought that they were parting for ever!

And now all that was left for her to do was to stand by the fence and listen to the busy rumble of his tractor somewhere beyond the wheat and piles of uprooted flax. Think, if you want to, of your first love, rave, and cry

* ~~Jackdaw~~ " is in Russian "Galka," a familiar form for Galya.
—Tr.

out to him to make him remember and come back to you. Once as a girl you glowed with warmth standing with him in the snow; now you stand alone, your feet chilled by the summer dew. Go back into the house, you foolish woman. You are wasting your time. Let his tractor drone in the distance and keep you awake until dawn.

Quietly, Galya went in.

The doors of the porch, the kitchen, and the living-room were old and creaky. No matter how careful you were, you could not prevent their squeaking from playing on your heart-strings. It was dark in the cottage. Some of the windows faced south, others east, but under the overhanging eaves those windows were like eyes of a morose man who sees only the ground underfoot. Galya groped to the corner where the bed stood, unfastening her frock as she went. Slipping off her clothes, she felt for the edge of the bed and carefully lay down. But that was unnecessary—Sonechka was still awake, staring into the darkness, her cheek lying on her hand. Galya drew her daughter closer and stroked her thin, warm shoulders.

"Mummy, where's Father?"

"Sleep, little one, he'll return soon."

"You always say that. You said that when I was little and you still say it. Mummy, is Father a good man?"

"Of course, he is."

"But Lyonka, the fool, says Father isn't in the city, that he's in prison, and that he's a . . . what's it called Mummy?"

"What?"

"Oh, what was it? I've forgotten!"

"Sleep, or you won't want to get up in the morning."

"But Lyonka says—"

"That's enough!" cried Galya, herself surprised by her sudden passion.

The girl started, then lay still. This was the proper moment for her to start crying, for she was hurt by her mother's sharp tone. Instead she lay quietly for a while, then her thin arms wound round Galya's neck.

"I'll go to sleep, Mummy. And you go to sleep too. All right?"

"All right. Only turn over to the wall. There, that's a good girl."

Galya had to force the words out. But the little girl finally quieted down. That was good. Better for her and for her mother, too.

"She's too young to see my tears, to know what I think of the man who, unfortunately, became her father and my husband. We'll go to sleep, little one, that'll be better...."

The quiet round moon rode high over the cottage roof. The tractor had stopped somewhere beyond the wheat fields and the fragrant flax. Sleep, Galya, rest while the moon is still in the sky. Sleep, sleep, waste no time, while the tractor-driver and his mate have stopped for a smoke. But Galya could not sleep, of course, she did not even try. And again the tractor began to drone, again its busy sound swelled and rolled across the fields like waves.

"Mummy, I've just remembered the word. Father's a 'profiteer.' What's that, Mummy? Mummy, are you asleep?"

Galya said nothing.

"The trouble is not only that he's a profiteer. But I'll keep silent for the time being. Better go to sleep and don't let such things worry you. Let your mother worry—she deserves it, she is to blame...."

Yurochka never returned to Garositsa, either to make sheepskin coats or to kiss his Galya. Soon after their parting, Sergei, a member of the Young Communist League, was thrown into prison. When he came back to

his village in September 1939, he learned that his sweetheart had married another.

How did it happen that young Mikola Khamenok, Danka's son, married Galya, the daughter of Marila the Farmhand? On the face of it there was nothing very surprising about it. He fell so violently in love that he married her against his parents' wishes. Many a girl would have married him in Galya's place. A fine farmstead, and a handsome lad. True, his father was a churlish fellow, but she was not marrying him after all, and it was not with him that she would live.

But Galya knew another thing, too. Mikola had been pestering her for a long time, even before Sergei Yurochka came. The news of Sergei's arrest and Galya's bitter tears had filled him with glee. At first she would not hear of him, but after a time the sharp edge of her grief became dulled. Every evening Mikola insistently pressed his suit, even shedding tears and threatening to take his own life or to kill both himself and her.... There was nobody she could turn to. The whole village said it would be a good match. Her mother and relations were on his side. He took her by force the first time, and the light went out of her life. Nothing was left for her but to weep and marry him in silence, to seek in him a refuge from disgrace. From the first day the crusty old man never called her anything but "bastard." When she could no longer conceal that which became obvious earlier than people had the right to expect, she heard nothing but the old man's scolding and the words: "Slut, beggar."

There was especial venom in the last word. Galya was a quick and good worker, but that was not enough for him. Danka lived and toiled for one thing only—to get rich. He lived for his barn. The old farm-house and his own head under its worn, greasy hat meant far less to him than that barn. It must always be filled to burst-

ing. To fill it, he must have fields. The more fields he had, the fuller the barn would be. The less you slept, the more you could work. The less you ate, the less you wore—the more would remain over. When he prepared to marry off his son, he altered and extended the barn to make room for the sheaves from his daughter-in-law's fields. But the lad lost his head.... Danka never regarded Galya as a member of the family, she merely took the place of a hired labourer. However hard she worked, he was never satisfied. Whatever she did, she could never make up to him for the disappointment, the injury, the loss to his farm for which she was responsible.

Mikola differed from his father only at the beginning, before the wedding. As soon as she crossed the threshold of the house, he showed himself to be his father's son.

As for old Danka—Only three times did she ever hear a kind word from him. The first time just after the wedding. Her mother-in-law boiled potatoes in their jackets and put them on the table. Danka took off his hat, combed his hair with his fingers, crossed himself and sat down.

"Melt a little butter," he ordered his wife.

Galya's mother-in-law was a quiet, submissive woman. For forty years she had toiled in silence, like a patient, uncomplaining old horse. She went to the store-room and returned with a spoonful of butter. It was not enough for a panful of potatoes, but it was too much for her to go back and dip her spoon into the pot again. In any case it was not the custom in that house. So the old woman decided to trick the new member of the family: she turned her back to the table and slipped three spoonfuls of hot water into the butter. Everybody saw it, but nobody spoke. Galya was amazed. Mikola even felt uncomfortable, but the old man was delighted—firstly with his wife's ruse, and secondly, because nobody appeared to have noticed it. With the blackened nails of his long

unwashed hands he peeled the jacket off a potato and, screwing up his eyes, he silently dipped it into the "butter." The more he bit off the potato, the deeper he dipped his fingers into the liquid.

"Help yourself, daughter, don't stand on ceremony," he said. "You never had this at home. You grew up poor. Dip your potato."

It was one summer night six months later that she again heard a kind word. Mikola was out, the old woman was groaning on the stove, and the old man was pottering about the yard. Then he rapped on the window with his dirty claws and quite unexpectedly called her by her name:

"Galya!"

She jumped.

"Come here, Galya!"

Surprised, she went out. "What on earth can he want?" The old man hurried along the path to the cherry orchard. There he stopped. Galya followed him a little distance away.

"What a night, eh?" the old man said. "And smell that clover, Simon's, damn him. Look how many stacks he's got! Go and get another sack," he added. "Then we'll both go again and get some more. . . . Where'll you find an extra bit when winter comes?"

He held an empty sack under his arm.

"I've never stolen in my life," she said. "If you haven't enough of your own, go and get it yourself."

She turned and went back into the house without stopping to listen to his scolding. She knew it all by heart. No wonder he removed his hat only to cross himself before the icon, and took off his boots once a week, on Saturdays. No wonder he had built such a large barn.

The third time he chose to be kind to her was when Antos was born. It was a difficult birth and Galya was in bed for a whole week.

"We ought to kill a hen," Galya's mother-in-law said on the third day.

This thought, born out of an understanding of pain, did not appeal to Danka. He was also unmoved by the insistence of his son—usually so obedient and sensible—that a fowl really must be killed. There was a hen that had stopped laying and clucked about the yard under the window as though begging for the knife. Danka's wife and son held their ground. And there was that woman, damn her, lying in bed just at harvest time. The old man enticed the hen into the porch, shut the door, drove it into a corner, caught it and seized the axe. The execution was carried out on the step. Then he brought the hen into the cottage, flung it on the floor, and said:

"There! Eat it!"

This was on September 16, 1919—the last day the gentry were in power.

They fled, but the Khamenoks stayed. Danka did not last long. That winter he couldn't sleep, he never undressed and even kept his hat on when he crossed himself.

"It's the end—the end of the world," he groaned as he lay on the stove.

In the spring the old man was at last carried out of the house, feet first. The next day Mikola threw the old hat into the attic and began to run things himself. A year later the old woman died.

...The tractor droned in the distance and the moon hung high in the sky. The tractor would work all night and the moon would give light to the driver until day-break. Dark-haired Sonechka's warm breath fanned her mother's shoulder. She had been asleep for a long time now. She had remembered the word the lads on the pasture called the father she scarcely knew. Let her sleep in peace, in ignorance.

Galya rose to get a drink in the kitchen, but changed her mind and went to the window. It was tightly closed, was not made to open, yet the drone of the tractor, working tirelessly beyond the sea of collective-farm wheat and flax, was louder here.

"Seryozha!" Galya whispered, her lips dry and parched. "Seryozha, come to me, come if it's only to ask for a drink...."

No, he would not come.

Only once did he enter this house.

It was early 1944.

At about midnight the Khamenoks were awakened by a rapping on the window. In those days only the partisans were masters of the land at night. Galya went to open the door. On occasions like this, her husband never rose from his bed.

Two men followed Galya into the house, the others remained outside, with the horses. Galya turned up the wick of the lamp and then withdrew into a corner. Her part was finished, the talking would be done by Khamenok.

"Good-evening! Are you ill?"

"Yes, Comrades, you know how it is with this—"

"Heart?"

"No, not exactly, well, I don't know how to explain."

"Ulcer?"

"Well, you see, Comrade—"

"Fretted yourself sick about your country, is that it? Don't bother to get up. I know you want to show me a lot of certificates."

The partisan flashed on his electric torch, and Khamenok blinked in its light.

"Everything as it should be," the partisan said. "The disease is taking its normal course. He has let his beard grow, his boots are hidden, and there is plenty of home-brewed vodka in the house."

Khamenok interpreted this in his own way.

"Yes, there's a drop of it somewhere, Comrades. I'm glad you reminded me."

"Lie down, lie down, Khamenok. Don't get up. Keep your liquor. The Nazi police will be along tomorrow, and maybe *Herr Feldwebel*, too. Keep your song-and-dance for them, you blackguard."

"You don't believe me, Comrades—" Mikola began

"We don't have to believe," the partisan cut him short. "We can see right through you. We've got your case history written up, beard or no beard. Your home-brew helps you to get away with anything. People are bleeding, and you— Twisting like a snake. Trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. It's no use wasting words on you! Where's your horse? Get up!"

Still pretending to be ill, Khamenok rose heavily and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Galya, give me my *valenki*."

She did not want to leave her corner. She would have liked to throw them at him, those ragged felt boots torn to make him look poor, to throw them at that red beard he had grown. She could have wept with shame and anger. . . . But she took the *valenki* off the stove and brought them over, holding them before her to hide as much as she could that she was again expecting a child.

"There," she jerked out in a choked voice.

Then he, Seryozha, turned and said:

"Good-evening, Galya! Are you hiding from us too?"

Foolish woman, why did you not cry out to him: "Take me with you, my darling!" Why did you not call him by the name that was dearer than any on earth— Seryozha? Why? Because words and tears were stifled in bitterness and shame?

"Good-evening," she said, dropping her eyes.

She was glad that the room was dim in the lamp-light and that he did not turn his torch on her. Evidently he still had some respect for her.

She did not follow them out to the shed, but remained on the porch by the open door. Huddling in her unfastened jacket, she listened to, no, drank in every word of these young, free, happy men.

Khamenok's cunning came to nothing. For two days he had worked to make a hollow in a stack of straw and for three months a healthy, well-fed mare fretted in the darkness. Now one of the young fellows came along, kicked what must have been a bucket and chanted like a priest:

"Where are you, O sinful soul? Come out into the light!"

The mare replied with a snort, and there was a burst of laughter on the threshing-floor.

Khamenok continued to whine.

"She's not as good as she looks. No wind. No legs to speak of."

"I'll be blowed, the horse's really got only four legs, just think of it, lads!" came a pleasant, laughing voice—it sounded as though its owner was a Ukrainian. "Well, Comrade Commander," he said, "it's my bad luck, I'll have to carry out orders. Shall I saddle her?"

"Yes, Artyom, only be quick about it." That was Servozha's voice.

"He's the commander. I knew it!" Galya thought with involuntary joy.

The man they called Artyom took the saddle off a small horse and put it on the mare.

"Whoa—stand still, my beauty—steady," he cried. "I'll leave you my Chaly, you there with the beard. But see you don't stick him in that hole of yours. I'll be along to see how you feed him. He's done a good job, that horse. Well—I'm off."

He put his foot into the stirrup and jumped up, his silhouette standing out against the white snow as he steadied the prancing mare.

"Good-bye, Shaggy Beard!" another partisan shouted. "Better get that rat's nest off your face. We'll be back to see. A shave now and then's good for you!"

"Don't listen to him. You can keep bees in it."

"That's it. There'll be no honey, but you won't oversleep!"

"Follow me!" came Sergei's voice again.

They rode off, leaving Khamenok holding the bridle of the exhausted horse they had left behind. As the sound of their young laughter and the clatter of hoofs on the cobbled road faded into the distance, it raised its head and sent a long, sad whinny after them.

"Come back to bed, it's no use standing there crying," Khamenok mumbled from under the blankets. "D'you think that I'm not sorry about her? To lose a mare like that, damn their eyes!"

"Go to the devil!" cried Galya, and climbed up on the stove.

Khamenok was silent, but not for long.

"Aha!" he said maliciously in the darkness. "So it's him, that gallows-bird, you're crying about! Well, you just wait, my beauty!"

He was still ready with threats, even then, when alien rule was nearing its end and the bright day of happiness was clearly in sight.

... Outside the sky was paling, and the full silver moon was turning white as its round was drawing to a close and it was preparing to surrender the heavens to the sun. And still the tractor droned on. . . .

"Come to me, Seryozha, come just once again! Just for one last time!"

Galya gazed into the distance, leaning heavily against the window-sill.

The sound seemed to be drawing nearer. Yes, it was coming closer, closer with every minute.

"Come to me, my darling, come back from where you went with the music of your accordion and the clatter of hoofs on the road, from that happy land where you have stayed so long!"

He *was* coming!

The tractor had stopped. There was silence.

Galya straightened up and walked away from the window. With an involuntary movement she smoothed her hair and hid her face in her hands.

Sergei was coming... young and gay as in the old days. Only now he would be in his blue, oil-stained overall, a cap in his hand, but with the same lock of fair hair over his laughing blue eyes. Wasn't that the grass whispering, wasn't that the sand on the path gritting under his feet? Now he would reach out his hand and tap softly on the window—and the past would fade out.

"Come, oh come, I've been waiting so long... so long!"

But what was that?

What did you think it was, you foolish woman?

The tractor began to roar again.... Drawing away, farther away with every minute. It was all so very simple: it must have made a turn. How very simple and how dreadfull... Sit down again by the window, sit there and listen. Scream in anguish, or sit and gaze in silence—it's all one. Though there is another thing you can do—weep.

Galya chose to weep, though there was no choice really—the tears came of themselves. Dropping her head on the window-sill, she sobbed bitterly, like an unhappy child left alone in a dark, strange room. And like a child exhausted by tears, she stopped at last. Weariness pressed down her eyelids with a soft hand and quieted her troubled heart. And Galya slept.

The rolling wheat fields, a sea of collective-farm grain, stretched out beyond the orchard. Mist lay upon them in a heavy blanket and through it peered the summer sun, a red orb, announcing that on this day, Sunday, it too was resting and wished to let all living things rest from its scorching heat.

Such wheat had never been seen in these parts before. Only a short time ago the land had been a pattern of boundaries and narrow strips of field. Now the wheat rolled softly away into the distance with hardly a ripple, the stiff heavy ears warm and slightly damp with the mist. Grand wheat! Just what was wanted. Another blow at those who were against a life of peace and happiness, another joy for honest hearts. Fussy grey sparrows chirped merrily as they flew about, alighting on the heavy ears like bees on flowers. But bees were always busy, humming their quiet song as they worked, while sparrows were simply happy and carefree. A giddy tribe!

The tractor continued to drone in the distance. . . .

Who had replaced Sergei, the accordion-player, in the driver's seat?

Galya's son Antos was washing by the well in the yard. He had drawn a bucket of cold water, taken off his shirt and was splashing and snorting from sheer enjoyment. He was a fine, lively lad and a good worker. It was good that he was so keen on work, so eager to study, so natural and friendly with everybody. He already understood that he had no cause to blame anybody or anything for his father's fate. "Blame yourself, you old fool. Your son is not going to hide his head because of you. Mother, though—that's another matter." Antos rubbed himself dry with a clean linen towel, until it seemed one could almost hear it rubbing his bronzed face and strong arms that had so well earned their rest.

Galya dearly loved her little Sonechka. She herself

had never been photographed in childhood—who would ever have thought of such a thing in the Farmhand's family? It was a wonder they had a mirror! Looking now at Sonechka, Galya seemed to see herself in that mirror again. That was how she must have looked long ago—large eyes, raven hair, and twittering like a sparrow.

Sonechka stood on the bed in her clean night-gown. Smiling, still sleepy-eyed, she held out her thin brown arms. Galya slipped on her bodice and fastened it, her nimble fingers running quickly down the white buttons. The little girl's warm arms wound tightly round her mother's neck, and the black head sank down on her shoulder. How Sonechka would have liked to rest it on her pillow again! But never mind, she was quite ready to get up too. She knew that at harvest time she had to take Antos' place with the cow. Buryonka, her friend, a gentle, quiet cow, was already grazing on the dewy grass in the orchard and the shining jug of milk was standing on the table beside her mug.

"Mummy, did we sleep together?"

"Yes, dear, we fell asleep together...."

"Mummy, is it Sunday today?"

"Yes. And you're going to put on your new frock. Look, there it is."

"Will you be going to the fields? They've finished with the rye.... Now it's the oats and wheat. Antos is going too."

"He will sleep a bit first. He was out threshing all night."

"Antos is big, isn't he, Mummy? He's a good boy, isn't he?"

"A very good boy, Sonechka."

"I am good too, Mummy. I always do as you tell me."

"You're a very good girl, my darling. The best of us all."

Galya held out clean, freshly ironed knickers, then drew the dear, warm little body into her arms. "You're my sunshine!" she thought. "Why aren't you the daughter of the man I love?"

From the distant fields came the hum of that tireless worker, the tractor. . . . Who was at the wheel now? Who had taken Seryozha's place?

"I thought and thought and thought last night, and then I remembered that word—'pro-fi-teer'! What does it mean, Mummy?"

"You'll understand when you're a little bigger, dear, and then I'll tell you all about it. And till then you'll be a good girl, won't you, and stop asking about it?"

"Yes, Mummy."

. . . Galya was walking past the wheat, over the dew-drenched grass, to the fields.

"No, he's not only a profiteer," her thoughts were still running back to her talk with her little girl. "He's a coward, vicious, petty, rotten to the core. He was never really your father, my little girl, he was never my real husband. Never!"

She remembered his beard. Unkempt, red, big enough for the bees to build a hive in. The day after the mare was taken, he sat for a long time before the spotted mirror, scraping at it with a blunt razor, groaning, cursing, but scraping. After that he shaved once a week until the Soviet Army arrived. Every night he expected the partisans to come and see if he had shaved off his beard. They never came, of course, and he did not change. He went to the front and somewhere he got a bullet through his arm. And how he paraded that arm, thrusting it under everybody's nose to show he was for Soviet power too! Meanwhile he speculated on yeast, getting it from Stolbtsy and Minsk.

He was finally exposed and had been in prison for more than three years now.

Perhaps she ought to feel sorry for him. After all he was the father of her children, they had lived many years together. . . . But no, she had no pity for him, never so much as a flicker of it!

That drone. . . . Soon the mist would lift and beyond the wheat, beyond the flax she would see the dark expanse of fresh, fragrant ploughland, would see how much her Seryozha had turned up during the night.

She saw somebody coming along the road.

Seryozha! . . .

Galya wanted to run, run to him, but instead she stopped and gazed. He was hatless, in a blue overall open at the throat, exactly as she had pictured him in the night.

"No, he mustn't see me!"

Leaving the stubble, she slipped into the wheat.

Sergei approached, but her white kerchief merged with the mist and he could not see her. He was not even looking her way. Galya's sad brown eyes followed him until he disappeared.

"Turn back, just for a moment, my darling, my lost youth! Turn back, sing me your merry song about the little jackdaw who is yours, still yours. Look in my eyes and I will burn down that farm-house with my own hands, take the children and follow you anywhere, anywhere!"

But the wheat, what wonderful wheat all round her—thick, tall, with never a weed. . . . Just what was wanted!

It was less a thought than a feeling. Galya's supple, hard hand passed over the ears, and their soft touch seemed to bring an ease and lightness to her heart.

What are you pleading for, why ache so vainly, my heart? May he live happily, my Seryozha! Can't I live without him, am I of no use to anybody, worse than all others in this free, sunny world?

"Ivan Stepanovich! Uncle Ivan! Help me, Uncle Ivan!"

Galya's lips whispered those words, spoken so many times in thought. And Uncle Ivan, kindly, wise Ivan Stepanovich, the chairman of their collective farm, looked at Galya from under his thick grey eyebrows.

"What's the matter, Galya?" he asked.

"Uncle Ivan, I can't go on living there, take me back into our village. Build me a cottage, we'll work it off, Antos and I, we'll work everything off, everything! Take his name from us, Uncle Ivan. You know everything—who he is, who I am and who my children are...."

"Now, don't cry, Galya, there's no need to. Don't cry," Uncle Ivan said.

But still Galya cried—walked along the road with tears running down her face. Through the mist and through her tears which concealed from her that farmstead not yet swept off the earth, she could see thin, brown arms reaching out to her; they wound warmly round her neck, and she could hear a little voice in her ear: "My own dear, good Mummy!"

No, it is you who are good, my sunshine, you are the best of us all! And your life will not be like your mother's. Nobody will abuse it....

Galya walked home. And again in the night she would hear the drone of Seryozha's tractor. Again her soul would ache and ache until dawn. What of it? So long as the drone was there—in the fields.

Translated by G. Ivanov-Mumjiev



MUKHTAR AUEZOV

Kazakh Author

I was born in 1891 in a nomad family of Kazakhs. My ancestors came from Central Asia, but they joined the tribe of Tobikta as early as the beginning of the 19th century. To this tribe belonged the hero of my novel—Abai Kunanbayev, a poet and humanist, the father of Kazakh literature in its new written form. My early childhood was spent in an *aul*, a mountain village, and it was there that I learned to read and write, taught, together with the other children, by my grandfather Auez (to whom I owe my surname).

I have written over twenty plays, several short stories, and for the last ten years I have been working on my epic novel *Abai*.

When collecting my material on Abai I was confronted with some peculiar difficulties unknown to most writers of historical novels. The trouble was that there was no data whatsoever, either printed or written, on Abai's life, work, appearance or character—neither private papers, diaries, letters, memoirs, nor any reminiscences put down in writing. I had to gather all the information I could bit by bit over a period of years just talking to people who had known him. Much had dimmed and become erased from the senile memory of Abai's contemporaries and needed deciphering, puzzling out, comparing one story with another, and finally shaping into one whole.

Thus a lonely rider, raking through the ashes of a fire left by his caravan long gone on its way, finds a smouldering coal and fans it back to life, carefully and reverently. . . .

The Author

THE ASCENT

The bridegroom's train at length reached the *aul* of his future father-in-law.

Alshinbai had but recently arrived in this broad valley of abundant springs and pastures. His *aul* stood surrounded by some forty others, the tents of the Boshan clan, who were linked together through their common ancestor Kazibek. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the guests, *yurtas* had been prepared for them and food and drink were ready. On the day of the bridegroom's arrival the mares had been tethered for milking earlier than usual.

In accordance with time-honoured custom, Ulzhan and the elders, attended by thirty *jigits* and a bevy of women, had arrived a half day earlier. The chief negotiator for the bridegroom was to be Kunanbai's brother Izguty, who was following with *aksakals*, singers, *jigits*, and herdsmen to see to the horses. Abai had a suite of twelve *jigits* of the younger generation of Ir-gizbai, as well as jolly Mirzakhan, the messenger Zhumagul and Takeshan, his nearest kinsman. Abai had also invited Yerbol and throughout the long journey of more than a week, was inseparable from him.

Ulzhan had brought valuable gifts: droves of horses and camels, a variety of fabrics for the women, and other valuables. Two camels were laden with gifts for the bride: bales of bright silks, velvet and other mate-

rials, and many shawls. Two other camels carried huge bundles of capes, shirts, kerchiefs, kaftans, all kinds of materials, footwear and other gifts as prescribed by custom.

The most valuable of the gifts were ingots of silver for Alshinbai himself.

Ten years before, when Kunanbai had come to obtain the promise of Dilda's hand, the bride's parents had presented him with a heavy *tai-tuyak*.* And now, Ulzhan had brought nothing less than a *besik-zhamba*** of even more astonishing proportions. Kunanbai's gift had thus outshone Alshinbai's, and no sooner had the bridegroom arrived than all the *auls* could speak of nothing but the generosity and precious gifts of his father. It was soon learned, however, that Alshinbai was going to pay in kind.

Three enormous snow-white *yurtas* stood magnificently furnished for the bridegroom and his kinsmen. One-year-old foals just weaned from the mares, three-year-old rams and the largest of the lambs had been picked for slaughter. A fattened foal was especially set aside for the *yurta* occupied by Ulzhan.

Abai's train came to a halt as they drew near the *aul*, while a part of the *jigits*, including Takezhan, Mirzakhan and others, rode on to announce his arrival. Abai and Yerbol dismounted to meet the girls and young women who were to come out of the *aul* to receive them. That would mark the beginning of endless and complex ceremonies, and Abai detained Zhumagul, who in his time had endured all the torments of the ritual and might be useful.

"A wedding is supposed to be a joyous occasion for the bridegroom and his parents," Abai remarked to

* *Tai-tuyak* (foal's hoof)—a silver ingot of specified size.—*Tr.*

** *Besik-zhamba*—cradle-ingot.—*Tr.*

Yerbol. "Why then do they torture people with those endless ceremonies?"

Zhumagul laughed.

"You are going to be tortured—and very soon! There are no feathers in your hat to begin with. And you'd better put on that red cape before you get your cheeks slapped!" The bridegroom's traditional fur hat, pulled well over his eyes, had to be tufted with the feathers of an eagle-owl. In addition, he had to wear a cape of red cloth and high-heeled boots to distinguish him from the rest of his company. The attire had been prepared for Abai before the journey on Zereh's orders, and though the old woman had always let her pet grandchild have his own way, she had tolerated no objections on this occasion.

"It is the custom of your forefathers," she had repeated firmly. "It's not you whom they will blame, but us! 'Were their fathers never bridegrooms or their mothers brides?' they will ask. Put it on at once!" She had helped him to dress with her own hands.

In this curious array, Abai felt much like a witch-doctor or an itinerant magician. As soon as they had left the *aul*, he edged his horse towards Ulzhan and pleaded:

"For the love of Allah, why should I proclaim that I am a bridegroom throughout the journey? Please let me wear my usual clothes. I'll put on this bridegroom's dress when we arrive."

Very reluctantly Ulzhan had consented. And thus Abai had not yet once donned his "sorcerer's" apparel. The tufted fur hat and the red cape were still stowed away in a saddle-bag. It was of these that Zhumagul reminded him.

"As you know, Barak-Batir once said, 'My heart has never quailed before an armed enemy, but quail it did when I had to call upon the parents of my betrothed.'"

Realizing that Abai was growing really nervous, he hastened to add, "Yes, there are horrors in store for you, but be firm of spirit, all will end well, I know it from experience."

The friends laughed and Yerbol once again exhorted Zhumagul:

"Please prompt him—when and how to bow, when to sit down or get up and when to push his hat from over his eyes at last and be comfortable."

Yerbol's painstaking attention touched Abai—his friend was worrying over details that would never have occurred to himself. Could there be a truer, more devoted friend?

Until then Abai had believed that the finest moments of their friendship had been those when Yerbol had crossed the flood waters of the wild mountain stream on the back of a bull. But now he seemed quite another man. Where was the Yerbol he had known before? That old friend and this one were two different people. Which was nearer to him—more dear?

On the day the journey began Yerbol had brought Abai news which had distressed him deeply. When Togzhan had learned that Yerbol was to accompany Abai to his betrothed, she had begged him to convey to her beloved the following message: "A brief glimpse in the light of the moon—and he was gone. I am left in darkness. But may his way be a happy one, may he be cheerful and fortunate—such is my salaam to him!" And as Yerbol had spurred his horse to go, she had covered her eyes with her kerchief and wept.

The vision had tormented Abai all the way. How acutely he had felt the crushing burden of compulsion, the yoke of an alien will which had forced him to make this journey. Morosely he now awaited his first meeting with Dilda.

The ringing laughter of girls and women suddenly reached his ears, followed by the tinkle of the *sholpy*. It was a bevy of women in snow-white head-dresses, and the girls in caps of homespun silk, coming to receive the bridegroom. A crowd of children was milling about them.

As they came nearer to Abai and his *jigits* some of them exclaimed:

"Now which is Abai?"

"Which is the bridegroom?"

"Why, they are all alike! He's not dressed as a bridegroom should be!"

Abai was embarrassed, but forced a smile.

"Pick whom you like best and let him be Abai," he said.

The girls laughed and quickly identified the groom. One of them, however, rebuked him:

"No, my dear! You may wear the Tobikta hat in your own *aul*! In ours you'll have to wear the wedding-dress!"

She began to question the *jigits* and to search for Abai's hidden wedding-clothes. Zhumagul finally yielded and took off the saddle-bag.

"Didn't I tell him, 'Put them on!' But no—he won't listen! Teach him a lesson now! I have his clothes right here!" He handed the bag to the girls.

While Abai was dressing, the children scrambled on to the horses' backs in twos and threes and galloped away towards the *aul*. A bunch of boys stood around Abai's white-maned golden ambler and looked at it admiringly.

"It's an ambler!"

"*Oi-bai*, how good!"

Three youngsters scrambled on to the saddle and drove the horse off. The welcoming party and the bridegroom's men had to walk to the *aul* on foot.

Against the other tents the *jurta* set aside for the bridegroom was a dazzling white. Inside, it had been decided not to decorate the tent excessively and to preserve an impression of spaciousness. The framework, however, had been concealed beneath rich silken draperies and ornate carpets, and the vivid colours of many fabrics lent the dwelling a festive elegance. Wool and elaborately patterned felt rugs extended from the entrance to the places of honour, heaped with silken covers and cushions. A couch of carved bone to the right was covered with fifteen spreads of silk and pillows of immaculate white. The head of the bed was curtained off by a piece of satin with designs of red and blue.

Seated in front of the bed, Abai was hemmed in by his future sisters-in-law. Yerbol, Zhumagul and the other *jigits* took places amid the girls a short distance away.

No sooner had all been seated than three young women ran into the tent calling:

"The curtain! Lower the curtain!"

The girls at Abai's side sprang up and lowered the satin curtain, to conceal him from the entrance. Only then did they fold back the door-flaps.

"Come in, come in," they said to someone beyond the door, glancing meanwhile in the direction of the bridegroom. "Welcome the mothers-in-law!"

Abai and all the others sprang to their feet.

The curtain was not raised, however, when three elderly women entered. The first was the eldest mother-in-law—the stout, dusky *baibishe* of Alshinbai. At her side stood the real mother-in-law, the mother of the bride.

"Well, mothers, the ransom! Where is the ransom? Or else we shall not show you your son," the young

women said jestingly, the hem of the curtain in their hands.

"Raise the curtain! Here's your ransom," replied the *baibishe*, indicating the sweetmeats she had brought.

The satin curtain was raised high to reveal the bridegroom, standing dumbly obedient, his head modestly bowed.

"May you live a long and happy life! May Allah grant you a happy future, light of my eyes," said the *baibishe* as she threw the sweets to the girls.

There was a shower of dried apricots, raisins and sweets, caught in mid air or retrieved from the carpet by the laughing young women.

"May God give you joy from the first," chimed the mother of the bride. "May you have lasting joy and happiness, my dear Abai!"

No answer was expected from the bridegroom. He had merely to stand still, submissively silent. Alshinbai's wives kissed him upon the cheek one by one and, without more ado, departed from the *yurta*.

Abai was uncomfortable throughout the evening, unable to accustom himself to his new position. The huge bridegroom's hat hanging over his eyes made him sweat and irritated him. But the worst to endure was the staring. From all sides they were staring unashamedly at him. "Is he handsome? Is he a fit spouse for our daughter? How is he behaving?" said every curious pair of eyes. Having arrayed the young man in clothing which turned him into a stuffed dummy, they seemed to be mocking him now: "Just look at him! See what he is like!"

Tea was soon served, but conversation flagged. Zhumagul and Yerbol, whose jests had always evoked laughter, now felt ill at ease and sat stiffly, exchanging polite remarks with the girls near them. Abai was par-

ticularly struck by the appearance of three of the girls, who were elaborately dressed and had unnaturally white faces and flaming cheeks. He did not know that it was customary for the grown-up girls of the Boshan people to paint their faces.

The elder *jigits*—Mirzakhan, Takezhan and their friends—gathered in the *yurta* after tea. With them they brought the singers and jesters of the Boshan clan. The company brightened up, there was a cheerful hubbub of talk and jokes. A merry noisy cluster of girls and women surrounded the bridegroom. All were there but one—Dilda, the bride, had not yet appeared.

The first visit of the groom was known as “the ceremonial visit,” or sometimes “the visit with gifts” or “the crossing of the threshold,” or “the visit of the pressure of the hand.” This being a first visit, it was hardly likely that he would see much of his bride.

The parents had first to hold a *toi** to celebrate the first visit and the conclusion of the marriage contract. A *toi* was no light matter, and had to be arranged thoroughly and without haste. After this would come “the pressure of the hand” between bride and groom. So Abai did not see his bride on the first day. Nor did he see her on the second day, and he continued to stay in her *aul* without the faintest idea of what she looked like. Only Yerbol was able to pay his respects to Dilda on the day after their arrival. Pleased with her appearance he was glad for Abai’s sake and returned to share his impressions with him. But Abai cut him short and changed the subject.

The *toi* which the young people had been awaiting so impatiently was held on the third day after the bridegroom’s arrival. From morning till night Abai’s *yurta* was thronged with innumerable women—the

* *Toi*—feast.—*Tr.*

mothers-in-law, girls, young wives and his exacting and noisy sisters-in-law. Zhumagul and Yerbol received them with a most courteous and dignified air, and it was as much as they could do to greet each of the countless women who came. Abai was sorely harassed by both of them.

"Now get up! And now sit down!" they urged incessantly. "More have arrived! *Oi-bai*, many more!" And they would make him go through the ceremony all over again.

The singing did not cease in the bridegroom's *yurta*. The merry-making was in full swing, and sweetmeats were steadily consumed. A constant flow of servants kept the guests supplied with koumiss and tea, and the table-cloths were never removed.

"The *toi* has begun, the *toi*!" came the cries beyond the door after dinner.

"To your horses! Mount the horses!" shouted others.

Abai and all the men of his company rushed out of the *yurta*. The horses of the bridegroom's suite stood tethered and saddled. Like other men, the groom was permitted to mount and watch the feast on horseback. The girls and young women stayed in the *aul*, while Abai and his suite of fifteen rode off and took up a vantage point somewhat apart from the others.

The numerous *auls* in that flourishing valley were observing the occasion with extraordinary generosity, regaling all whom they could gather. Alshinbai was determined to dazzle everybody with the splendour and magnificence of his *toi*, and so many guests had been invited that their horses roamed about in huge droves.

Yes, it was a great *toi*—there were as many as five or six dozen *yurtas* set up for the guests, extending in a double row for no less than a mile. The kitchen *yurtas* had been placed at the other end of the *aul*.

Abai and his suite had come out in time to see a long line of servants charging from the kitchen to the guest *yurtas*, every man of them on horseback. Some twenty masters of the feast, easily distinguished by the white cloths wrapped around their heads, stood waiting outside the kitchen tents.

The *jigits* detailed to serve the guests were mounted on the fastest pacers—this to stress the magnificence of the *toi*. The slender, well-groomed horses were dashing to and fro, covered with lather. Twenty *jigits*, holding the reins in their teeth then flew towards the guest *yurtas* with a deep dish in each hand. Others followed at their heels. These riding waiters galloped jauntily to their respective *yurtas* at top speed and came rigidly to a stop without spilling so much as a drop of the contents of the dishes. The *aksakals* and *karasakals* deftly took the hot dishes from them and handed them to others within the tents.

As usual the guests ate heartily and the waiters were kept galloping between kitchen and guest *yurtas*. The feasting had begun when Abai was still in his *yurta*. By now he had ridden far into the steppes with his *jigits*, but the eating and drinking went on. The guests mounted their horses only after they had drained an enormous number of skins of koumiss and consumed innumerable dishes of meat.

Then followed the games: races, wrestling, a game in which the riders struggled to capture the carcass of a goat, combat on horseback and horsemanship contests. The old men who came out to watch could not cease marvelling.

"This is a great *toi*," they said.

"The bridal gifts were very fine, but Alshinbai too has grudged nothing!"

It was on that evening that Abai first saw his bride.

The groom's *yurta* was bursting with guests. All the relatives of bride and groom had come, headed by Alshinbai himself, Ulzhan and Izgutty. Abai and his suite sat separated from them by a screen, and it was only the elders who spoke and laughed freely. The young people behind the screen spoke in whispers—only the girls dared laugh quietly, since they were more at ease in their own *aul*. Finally, there was a movement behind the door, and the young women at the entrance drew back the door-flaps to admit several girls.

One of them was Dilda. Her face was hidden in a red hood so that Abai and his friends could see only her figure as she removed her outdoor shoes. The bride seemed to be tall, slim and well-proportioned.

She was led to her place at Abai's side, and there she sat, without discarding the hood. Abai would have liked to say a few words in greeting, but Dilda had not turned to him and he held his tongue.

Immediately the bride arrived, the meat dishes were served. Both the guests of honour and the young people behind the screen applied themselves to the food, but the bride and the groom scarcely touched it. When the meal was over, a mullah, whom Abai could not see from behind the screen, read the marriage prayer. A chalice of cold water was then brought and passed round, first of all to the guests of honour, until it finally reached Abai, who took a sip and proffered it to Dilda.

Two of the bridesmaids then smilingly seated themselves before the bride and groom, wrapped Dilda's right hand in a light silk fabric and placed Abai's right hand upon it. He could feel her slender fingers. One of the bridesmaids who sat facing him humorously observed:

"Oh, he's sharper than he looks! Has your hand stuck to hers? Now, give your hand to me! Stroke her hair," she commanded.

The girls beside her laughed loudly. The bridesmaid took Abai's hand and guided it so that he stroked the bride's braid with the palm. The silk used for the pressure of the hand was here used again. Abai had to stroke the braid twice.

The wedding concluded with this ritual, long known as "the pressure of the hand" and "the stroking of the hair." After this final ceremony it was customary to reward the bridesmaids. The quick-witted girls succeeded in getting their share from Dilda as well.

The elders then raised their hands in final prayer:

"May happiness accompany them! May they live long! May Allah grant them abundance!" they chanted in unison.

These wishes of their kinsmen reached Abai and Dilda behind the screen. The elders then rose and left the *ymrta*. The young people did not stay long either. They all went their ways to leave the groom with his bride.

Abai had not yet spoken a word to Dilda. They had not even seen each other properly. From the corner of her eyes she had only managed to steal a glance at his features when, herself concealed by the screen and the hood, she was taking her place at his side.

There seemed to be more room in the *ymrta* now. One of the maids who had been rewarded for her part in "the stroking of the hair" now turned to Abai:

"We shall prepare the bed! You'd better go into the open for a while. Refresh yourself a little!"

Abai was chilled by her frankness. Quickly he arose and left the *ymrta*. There was not a soul to be seen about, and even Yerbol had vanished. He was alone. The night seemed blacker, for the clouds had

gathered in the evening. Abai walked far from the tent.

The girls too left Dilda. Only two bridesmaids remained, the two from whom she had been inseparable the entire evening. One of them now led her out of the tent while the other lowered the curtain and prepared the festive spreads of the couch for the night.

The bridesmaid embraced Dilda and laughingly asked:

"How did you like him?"

Her reply was calm:

"How can I tell—he's fat and dark, isn't he?"

There was a note of disappointment in her words.

"Nonsense! You did not have a good look at him! He's dark and handsome," the maid reassured her.

The bridegroom's heart too was heavy.

All that abundance and glitter and his suite of friends and kinsmen truly belonged to the celebration of a happy occasion. Merriment, good food, crowds of guests, splendour and magnificence had followed his every step. The prayers and good wishes were meant to stress the happiness awaiting the two young people. But did they really? Had not the elders arranged it all merely to observe the courtesies and demonstrate their mutual regard—for the sake of upholding the age-old traditions?

Abai and Dilda had not even seen each other, but the elders were not concerned about that. The first real meeting of bride and groom was to take place on the nuptial bed now being prepared.

Abai had read many books. "My beloved and chosen one"—how he had worshipped those words! They had blossomed in his heart pure and bright. Togzhan's shining beauty now tormented him. He could not forget her for a moment. But Togzhan was far away—

why did she not appear before him now, a winged vision?

A sudden silvery tinkle—Abai wheeled. It was one of the bridesmaids.

“Do you really think you’re priceless?” she said jestingly. “Why do you make her wait so long?” With this, she led him to the *yurta*.

The curtain was down and the bed stood ready. Dilda and the maid were nowhere to be seen. Abai removed his coat, which was promptly put away by the young girl, who then removed his boots and reminded him that he was to give her a last gift for the last ritual—“the removal of the boots.” The gift usual on such an occasion was considerable. But Abai’s pockets contained sufficient money provided by his thoughtful mother. He flung the money to the girl almost with revulsion.

The moment he had undressed, he threw himself upon the bed and rolled under the silken cover. Dilda had not yet come, although he could hear the tinkle of her *sholpy* from time to time. Was that too a part of the custom? If she would only enter while the lamp still burned! But having seen Abai safely to bed, the bridesmaid took the lamp and opened the door to admit Dilda as she slipped out.

His bride was approaching in the dark. He had been indignant all day but now he suddenly grew numb and indifferent. As he lay quite still, he could clearly hear her every movement, every rustle of her approach. She was removing her *besbmet*; then she threw off her little boots and in an instant stood over the bed. Not at all bashful, she began to feel for her place. Abai had not noticed that he lay near the very edge. Suddenly he heard her say somewhat roughly:

“Move over!”

Such was the first meeting of the young pair whose union had been celebrated for days with magnificent festivities, with all the attendant feasting and other lavish spending. So indifferent, commonplace, ordinary. Abai edged away towards the wall.

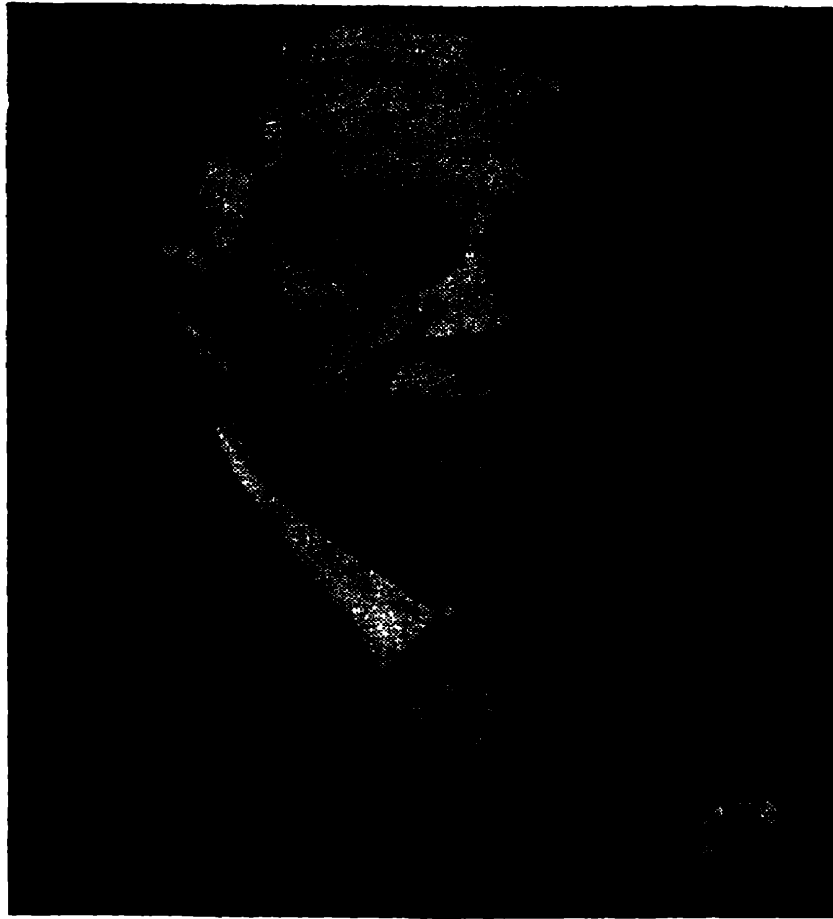
He could not overcome his coldness and reserve. In Dilda too there was no warmth. She had suffered herself to be led to the groom as prescribed by tradition, but her heart was alien to him. Her pride haughtily reassured her: if her spouse was the son of Kunanbai, she was the granddaughter of the esteemed and respected Alshinbai. Shame and bashfulness was the lot of the common people. Calmly she did all she had been advised to do by the bridesmaids.

Abai stayed in Alshinbai's *aul* for two weeks more. Ulzhan left five days before her son, but the *jigits* stayed behind with the bridegroom.

By the time of Abai's departure the young pair had grown somewhat used to one another. At times they had even jested and laughed. To Abai Dilda seemed attractive and even pretty. She, too, had grown used to his ways. But they were not drawn to one another and their hearts were cold.

The elders were wont to regard the first visit of a bridegroom as his initiation into a new life. Abai had gone through it, but not a spark had been kindled within him. On the contrary, when he returned home something seemed to have snapped inside him, and he appeared to have aged suddenly by several years.

Translated by L. Navrozov



EDUARD VILDE

Estonian Author

Eduard Vilde (1865-1913) is one of the most prolific and popular writers of Estonia. He was born in the north of the country, on a landlord's estate where his father was employed, and as a child he had ample opportunity to observe the hard life of the peasants.

Beginning his literary career at the age of seventeen, he worked from 1883 for over twenty years as a journalist in Tallinn, Riga, Berlin and elsewhere, and simultaneously wrote fiction.

In early 1906 tsarist Russia's police hounded Vilde into emigrating to Western Europe. In 1911 he visited the United States. In 1907 he returned to Estonia.

THE SKIPPER'S SLEEPING-DRAUGHT

Mait! Oh, Mait!" Mait pretended not to have heard, and strode on with measured step.

"I say, Mait!"

Still he did not respond. The girl ran faster. Just behind Mait's back—he must now hear her panting breath—she shouted once more, "Wait, Mait, will you?"

"Well, what d'you want?" Mait said, stopping and slowly turning his head to look at the girl. He did not take his short pipe out of his mouth or his hands out of his pockets.

Maarja did not catch her breath at once. Her full, firm bosom was heaving, her cheeks were ablaze. Mait took no notice of it; besides, the evening shadows were already so heavy that he could see neither the girl's complexion nor the dry glitter in her eyes. He did not try to, either. He had recognized the girl by her voice. He curtly repeated his question, as if he were in a hurry.

"Don't you know?" she said in astonishment. "I was told that you're leaving tomorrow. Are you?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't tell me!"

"What of it?"

"How can you ask! I suppose you were going to leave without—"

"No. I meant to drop in tomorrow morning to say good-bye—to the captain and you."

"Only tomorrow morning! Oh, Mait!"

"Well, you see, er—" he faltered, shifting his pipe to the other corner of his mouth. "After all, what's there for you and me to talk so much about?"

The large woollen shawl that the girl had thrown over her head slipped down to her shoulders, and the raw breeze ruffled her fair curls. As Mait's calm and cool face was turned towards the sea, whose thick grey ice-crust already showed dark cracks and clefts cut by the April winds, Maarja stepped close up to him, hung her head lower still, and whispered:

"What's there for us to talk about? You make me cry, saying things like that. If we've got nothing to talk about, why did you encourage me?"

"Encourage you? Just how?"

"You were so kind to me, so—"

"I'm kind to everybody," he laughed.

"But you liked me more than anybody else. Everywhere you wanted to be with me. You were always hanging about me."

"That was because you're so good-looking. I'm a man who thinks highly of good-looking girls. And of course I like handsome girls better than plain ones. I can't help it, can I?" To this weighty statement he added with the sincerest air, "But you mustn't think that I'm going to forget you so soon. I remember good-lookers a long time."

"How can you make fun of me at this moment, when I— Mait, you shan't leave me like that! You mustn't dash my hopes, you really mustn't."

"Hopes, indeed!" he cried angrily. "Won't you tell me what hopes I've given you? Don't you see I can't think of marriage as yet? How could a penniless fellow like me keep a wife? I've never hinted by word or deed that I was going to marry you, have I? If you can

think of, anything to deny what I'm saying, let me hear it right away."

Maarja did not say a word. But then her eyes said a great deal. Her warm, yearning gaze was riveted on the young man, who kept looking away. He waited a moment for her to reply, but as her quivering lips remained sealed he finally turned to face her squarely.

"I'd like to tell you something, Maarja," he began, in a gentler and warmer tone of voice than before. "I'm going to speak to you like a man, and I'll tell you quite frankly how things stand with me. I won't deny that I like you—sometimes I like you very much indeed—and once in a while I kind of said to myself, 'Maarja's a damn fine girl, she'd make a good wife to any honest chap, and she'd suit me too as far as her looks are concerned.' That's what I thought to myself sometimes—I really did. But, you know, Maarja, I'm a queer character. Why, I've travelled a lot, I've been to big cities and foreign countries, because a seaman gets around quite a bit. As I looked about me and saw all that beauty and wealth and all those smart people, I couldn't help saying to myself, 'Poor me, what am I by comparison, who'll ever stop to look at me, who'll ever take any notice of a wretch like me!' And you know, Maarja, that's when a devil took hold of me, and he's been prompting me ever since, 'Be a man, Mait, try to get rich! Seek for wealth, because wealth will make your life quite different.' But how's a man like me to get rich? By fair means, that is? Because where'll you be if you go in for thieving? A man should fear God and the police. So how's Mait Nākisaar to get rich? Can you tell me, Maarja?"

She could not. She had never given any thought to that. She was merely listening in open-mouthed amazement to the young man's talk, with a look of awed perplexity in her eyes.

"You don't know." Mait smiled, and began to fill his pipe. "I'm not surprised—I'm not quite clear about it myself. All I know is that that devil won't let go of me. God knows I can't make money or live thriftily. I get my pay—all right!—in a couple of days it's gone! A fellow like me doesn't get much, does he? And there's no chance to win promotion—a sailor can't become a helmsman or a shipmaster without proper training, that much is certain. Once a sailor, always a sailor, that's all. But I'll be damned if I'm going to holystone decks all my life long! Nothing doing! My ambition won't allow it."

"What are you going to do?"

"You're asking me as if you were afraid I was going to sell my soul to the devil. Don't worry. D'you know what's at the back of my mind? I'm going to look and look till I find a rich wife. I don't care whether I find her here or elsewhere. There *must* be rich girls somewhere, there always have been. . . . Well, now you know. Now you can see for yourself where we stand."

Maarja made no comment. Her fingers fumbled with the fringe of her shawl and pulled at it. She turned her face to the sea looming dark in the grey twilight, and gazed wide-eyed into the distance. Mait was silent too, as if waiting for a reply; he stood sucking at his pipe, while the wind blew away the curls of smoke.

"How much money would you expect your wife to have?" Maarja asked suddenly, as if waking up.

"The more, the better," replied the young seaman, laughing. "But, really, Maarja, there's no point in our talking about it any longer. I've got to pack my kit because tomorrow we'll be sailing for Tallinn pretty early. I must keep the old man company tonight, who knows when he'll see his son again. And there's another thing I'd like to tell you. Don't be cross with me! I'm just a kinky, flighty fellow that would hardly make you a

good husband. A girl like you, Maarja, has a good chance to get herself a golden man for husband. To hell with a dolt like me, and be once more the cheerful, gay girl you used to be! You have a nice job at the captain's—you live there like a real lady. You'll have as many suitors as there are blackberries, don't you worry about that."

He held out his hand to bid her good-bye, but she did not take it. She did not even notice it. She kept staring at the sea, whose dark patches of clear water between piled-up ice-floes looked like fresh graves.

"I don't want any other husband!" she whispered petulantly.

"Don't talk like a child."

"I don't want anybody else! I don't!"

"Damn it, why must you stick to me of all men—?"

He did not finish. A foolish look came into his face and his jaw fell open as he saw the tears gushing from Maarja's eyes—as suddenly and impetuously as a mountain spring. But it did not last long. The girl dried her eyes angrily, and the tears stopped at once.

"How much money would you like your wife to have?" she repeated her question, dryly and sternly.

"Why, how can I tell off-hand?" he replied. "The more, the better. Well, at least enough to set up a business somewhere in town—a tavern for seamen or a shop—or, say, enough to buy a couple of boats or a fine schooner that I could captain and coast on, selling goods. How can I say now?"

Again Maarja made no reply for a while. She was thinking. Her eyes seemed to be trying hard to see far, very far through the dark, so tense and mysterious was her gaze.

"Look here, Mait. What if I had as much money as you wish?"

"You? Ha-ha-ha!"

"But suppose I had it—what would you do then?"

"How funny you are!" he answered, still laughing. "*Suppose* you had it—ha-ha-ha! Don't you know what a tricky thing that 'suppose' is? Of course, if you had it— If you had it I'd marry you at once."

"Would you keep your word, Mait?"

"It wouldn't be hard to."

"Would you give up others who were just as rich and marry me?"

"That I would, honest to God! Didn't I tell you I liked you very much?"

"Swear it, Mait!"

The broad grin instantly vanished from Mait's face. It might have been because of Maarja's tone, a tone she had never used towards him before, or perhaps he happened to glance into her face. It was a hard, set face.

"What's the matter with you, Maarja?"

"Swear that you'll marry me if I have the money!"

"You? Money? Do you mean to say you've got money?" he cried in perplexity. "I thought it was a joke, but you look like a prophet— Have you really got money?"

"Perhaps I'll get some."

"But how? You're a poor girl. And you haven't got any rich relatives either."

"Yes, I have. I have an old aunt who's ill, she's rich and childless and she—"

Her voice sank to a whisper.

"Where is that aunt of yours?" asked Mait incredulously yet eagerly.

"She lives in—in Saare*—no, that isn't it, what do they call it, now? Oh, yes, she lives in Finland!"

* A slip—she meant to say *Saaremaa* (Oesel, an Estonian island in the Baltic) instead of *Soomemaa* (Finland).—Tr.

Mait laughed doubtfully. But because Maarja's face remained as grave as a "prophet's," he added in a gentler tone:

"I don't mind swearing if that's what you wish. And I can be as good as my word, too. But listen, Maarja, it may take you very long to come by your aunt's thousands. Sometimes it's awfully dull to wait for somebody to die."

"How long can *you* wait?"

"Oh, let's say two—or three—years. That long I can wait, I'm still young. But no longer, mind you. Let's make it *two* years, Maarja—there's no telling what may happen."

"Do you swear it?"

"I do, if you must have it. You know that I never lie or break my word, and if anybody dared say that Mait Näkisaar wasn't a square-dealing fellow that you could trust I'd knock him down on the spot. But now I must be going, Maarja. The old man's waiting. Let's call it a deal, and good-bye!"

Maarja took his hand. It was warm while her own hands were icy and stiff.

"When shall I see you again, Mait?"

"I may come back next winter if the ship doesn't get stuck in the ice somewhere far off. Or I may be at the other end of the world, and then, of course— Good-night, Maarja!"

He withdrew his hand and turned his back on her. Suddenly he felt Maarja's arms entwine his neck.

"There, now!"

The girl peered into his face in eager expectation. But as Mait repeated his grudging "There, now," she took her hands away and walked off hurriedly.

"If she'd been an old maid who wanted to hook a young man and so said and did foolish things, I'd think it a weakness. Then I could have laughed it away and

forgiven her. But the way she is—a young and healthy and lively girl, even though a bit—er—playful, as old women say—what makes her run after me like this? A girl like her could certainly get a husband. Because if she couldn't, what chance would the old and plain ones have? And yet they get settled too. What the hell does she see in me, anyway? I wish I knew. An old maid may show weakness, but why should this girl do it?"

Turning these things over in his mind and shaking his head, Mait strode homewards over the soft, loose sand of the shore. Although he watched his step carefully he stumbled every now and again, his feet sinking deep in the crumbling sand. Perhaps he was upset by the bad road, for his eyebrows were knitting closer and closer together and the things he muttered in his thick black beard sounded anything but good-humoured.

"What a bloody fool I made of myself, giving my word! A joke is a joke and all that she said to me was a lot of twaddle, but that's just it—a man should never pledge his word over a joke, let alone swear on it. The things people can say unthinkingly! Why, now she may go as far as to say that I've given her hopes! Damn!"

After uttering this strong word Mait was silent for a while. Then he went on to grumble.

"The more I think of her, the less I like her. A girl who thrusts herself on you, a girl who tries to force—who throws herself on a fellow's neck—pah! I wonder where she's learned those tricks. A peasant girl, too! Of course, if she'd been in town— But she worked on a farmstead and they sacked her—she says it was because the mistress took a dislike to her—and a farmstead isn't like a town, where I've seen some girls—" He coughed and blew his nose; then he wiped his beard and went on to mutter: "On the farmstead—don't I know it? A baron's sons, both of them students, the elder a famous scapegrace— But no, rubbish! It's hus-

band that she's after. What else can girls want nowadays? But a girl who thrusts herself on you, who offers herself—tries to force you to—pah!”

He quickened his step and, cursing the bad road, hurried on towards the seaside village, the dark huts of which had come into view round the bend of the shore.

Maarja was more upset and thinking harder than Mait. She ran a couple of hundred yards without looking back, then stopped with a heaving breast, her heart beating loudly, and peered after the young man's receding figure among the shrubs fringing the shore. She could still see Mait, but his tall figure soon disappeared in the darkness beyond a dune, and she stood all alone in a grove of dwarf alder-trees, the cold, wet catkins of which brushed her hands and flushed face.

“Maarja!” she called to herself. She wondered why she did it, but her yearning heart seemed to demand that she should voice her feelings somehow.

She shook her head and tried to smile, but felt that it was no good.

“Maarja,” she said again, in a whisper, and added in her mind rather than aloud: “What have you done? I mean, what are you *going* to do?”

Feeling her body grow heavy all of a sudden, she sank down on a large damp granite rock by the path. She touched her hair, set her shawl straight and pressed her left arm hard to her breast.

“I want him to be mine,” she thought. “I know I do, and I can tell that to myself. That's it, to myself, but I told it to *him*! I should be ashamed of myself!” For a moment she hid her face in her hands, then tossed her head. “Why should I be ashamed? Who else could I have told it to but him? Nobody else—just him and me. I have so much faith in him that I could trust him with anything—my very soul and my life. Only him. . . . Could any other man, a man like him—? With a face like his,

talking like him, as tall as he, and as kind-hearted, with the same beard, same eyes, a man as big and strong, a man exactly like him—could I—? No, no! There's nobody else like him! There are others, but none of them is the same as he. There are none like him. Besides, does a girl like me have much chance to see other men? How far can the likes of me go? Where can I look for a man like him? Those I see I've known for a long time. There's no other Mait among them."

She rose, but the next moment she sank limply back on the rock.

"That's it: *that's* just what I want from Mait—to be his lawful wife, only his. If not"—she laughed bitterly—"if not, why, then I don't care what happens. Other men—there are all sorts of other men! All those big and smart ones—ha-ha-ha! His lawful wife—Mait's wife—that's what I want to be. Because it's terrible to stray from the right path. And it's so easy to stray, too. But to stray when I'm all alone in the world as it is! Nobody loves me, nobody cares for me, I haven't got a single real friend, everybody lies and cheats—I'd be thrown over and laughed at. Oh, no!" she cried. "I couldn't bear to be alone in the world! I'd much rather, yes, I'd much rather—"

She shuddered from head to foot, and sprang up. A bird rose from a bush with a whir; Maarja looked up in fright, pulled her shawl over her eyes and started to walk with hasty step, almost running.

The alder-trees dropped behind, the path climbed up the rather steep shore and ran on over sandy ground, through a thin pine wood. Tufts of dry low grass and moss stuck up here and there out of the snow or snow-covered sand, and Maarja's foot kept slipping on wet pine-cones. A faint crackling noise came from the sea, and the wind moaned dismally and mysteriously in the pine boughs.

A light flashed between the trees. The slightly winding path led to the eastern fringe of the pine wood, and before long Maarja reached a small solitary wooden house built the way summer cottages are built in the coastal region of this country and yet suggesting a woodman's cabin or hunting-lodge. It was one-storeyed but had a high plastered basement, so that you had to climb up a rather high wooden staircase to get to the entrance. The house stood amid pine-trees, its northern side on the crest of the steep shore, but there was enough space for a small flower garden in front of the staircase and for a fairly large apple orchard around the house, where you could now see the dark beds and the bare fruit-trees and berry shrubs.

The house was inhabited by its owner, Captain Anderson, a wealthy old bachelor, who had had to retire because of ill health. He had moved in three or four years before, having bought the house and a small plot from the landowner. Maarja had been in his service since the autumn as a maid and cook. All the outdoor and other man's work was done by a labourer from the village. The skipper lived all alone except for a couple of dogs, a few exotic birds and a little monkey. Nor was he ever visited by any relatives, friends or acquaintances save Mait Nākisaar, for whom he showed a certain friendliness as the only fellow-mariner living in the neighbourhood.

Maarja ran up the steps and walked into the roomy kitchen, closing the door behind her as softly as she had opened it. But despite these precautions her arrival did not go unnoticed.

"Maarja!" came a shaky man's voice from behind the door of the adjoining room, a voice that sounded grating but was neither rough nor angry.

"Sly old fox—he can scent and hear anything."

Maarja cursed him in an undertone. However, throwing off her shawl, she hurried into the room.

It was Captain Anderson's study, which also served as a smoking-room. A large square room, it had yellow plastered walls, a whitewashed ceiling and a well-scrubbed floor. Its furnishings and adornments revealed the taste of a widely-travelled man. The walls were hung with all kinds of rare weapons, from Turkish scimitars to Indian tomahawks and African cross-bows; souvenirs of hunting in foreign lands—from elephant tusks to ibex horns—and all kinds of rare stones, musical instruments and shells, as well as other curios from land and sea. Stuffed birds and other creatures looked down from shelves. Motley-feathered birds clamoured in large and small wire cages hung up in front of the windows. A couple of parrots perched on swings suspended from the ceiling, and a little Spanish monkey skipped about on the floor and the chairs, playing pranks with two fine dogs of a rare breed that lay on a tiger skin spread out in front of the desk.

But the rarest object in those rare surroundings was the master of the house himself. He who saw him for the first time began by starting, then felt uneasy, and finally was moved to deep sympathy for the unfortunate man.

Captain Anderson's face was as yellow as sulphur. For all its breadth and fleshiness, it was so wrinkled and furrowed that you might have taken him for a decrepit old man of a hundred. His eyes had a dull, glassy glint, and his head was hairless but for grey down-like fuzz that gave him the appearance of an unfledged bird. His hands trembled, his eyes were screwed up, his lips moved incessantly as if he were trying to moisten them. His broad, round face, as yellow as a lemon, was completely beardless. He was not yet fifty, but whoever saw the sickly old man for the first time was bound to think that he had one foot in the grave.

Poor Anderson was an inveterate morphia-addict. Once, being taken ill following a terrible shipwreck, he had begun to take morphia on his doctor's advice. But, like thousands before him, the unfortunate skipper, too, had fallen under the sway of the fatal poison.

He had had to give up his vocation and seek recovery in quiet, secluded life in the country where he could breathe fresh air and inhale the wholesome fragrance of the forest. But, as usual with such attempts, while the spirit was willing the flesh was too weak. Anderson swore to himself every day that he would get rid of his addiction, but he never allowed his stock of morphia to run out; as soon as it ran low he hastened to secretly order more from St. Petersburg, and thus the vice persisted. When he tried in the course of a month to cut down the daily dose—he felt that it would be more than he could do to stop it abruptly—the next month he sank even deeper in his baneful passion.

"Well, Maarja, where have you been again?" he asked in a loud voice that quivered with morbid irritation in spite of himself, for he was trying to sound as friendly and cheerful as possible.

"Where I've been?" she replied, "Where *can* I have been? I went to the village to buy some eggs."

"I don't remember ordering any."

"Of course you ordered them," she lied, well knowing that he had a feeble memory. "You ordered them this morning when I told you there were no more eggs left. But even if you hadn't ordered them, mustn't a good maid know what's lacking in the house?"

"All right, all right. Where are the eggs, then?"

"I couldn't get any."

He gave a peculiarly short cackle, as if it hurt his lungs to laugh, and there was an odd twinkle in his dim eyes as he squinted at the girl.

"You couldn't get any eggs, but I suppose you managed to see Mait Nākisaar?"

"You and your Nākisaar!"

"Maarjal! Maarjal!" He wagged his finger at her, but there was a smile on his face. "Come here this moment and own up that you've been seeing Mait Nākisaar."

"I've nothing to own up. The ideas you get!"

"Come here, quick—you're on trial, and stop arguing!" he commanded jokingly.

Reluctantly she drew nearer. He grabbed her by the pinafore and pulled her up.

"You and Mait had agreed that you'd meet secretly once more tonight, hadn't you? Out with it, you pretty sinner!"

He looked at Maarja's ruddy face with a tense gaze that belied his jocular manner, and pinched her chin and cheek.

She always shrank in disgust from the yellow-faced old man, and whenever he tried to touch her with his trembling, gnarled, moist hand, as he often did, she fled from him with a feeling that verged on horror. This time, too, when she felt his fingers close to her body, she shuddered all over, but she stayed where she was. She even tried to laugh with roguish gaiety, and skittishly struck away his hand.

"What if I did meet my fiancé?" she asked boldly.

"Your fiancé? So it's got as far as that, has it?"

"Maybe it has. Anything is possible. Young blood, you know—"

Anderson's face took on a much graver expression, but he tried to conceal it at once.

"I think that's just another lie."

"Why should it be? Is Mait too good for me? Or am I too good for him?"

"I didn't—I didn't mean that. Hm, can it be true?"

Why, of course, it's perfectly possible. Too bad, Maarja, just too bad!"

He drew back his hand, thrust it into his pocket, and went on grumbling incoherently.

"Too bad, sir?" said Maarja with studied carelessness. "But why?"

"Well, because I let that rascal of a Mait come here so often. I was imprudent, as imprudent as an idiot! That dog's a good hand at cards, and that did it! Damn him, for all his skill in playing cards, if—"

"If what, sir?"

"Ye-es," he muttered to himself. "I noticed long ago how the girl's eyes shone the moment she saw that long-legged idler coming! Really, I was a bit too—too—oh, well!"

He took the girl's warm hands in a firm grasp, while his eyes glided up and down her face, neck, and bosom.

"I hope you're a sensible girl," he said with a kind of uneasy bitterness. "I think a buxom young girl like you— You know, Maarja, I think you'd have to wait for Mait too long, so long that you'd grow old and your beauty would fade. Mait is penniless, he can't get married so very soon, he wouldn't dare and indeed doesn't want to do it. But you, Maarja—so young and fresh—how could you wait so long? You might meet a man—a man, Maarja—if you were to meet a man who had a lot of money—"

His eyes searched her face as he waited for her to reply. And she was quick to reply, too.

"You could help Mait and me to marry, sir! A few thousand rubles doesn't mean much to you, does it, sir?"

"What a splendid ideal!" The old bachelor laughed in his grating voice. "You certainly are a crafty girl. But won't you tell me why I should make Mait a present of those few thousands? What has he done for me?"

"He hasn't, but *I* have."

"You? Hee-hee-hee! What good have you done? You've been a maid for six months, and you've always overdone the roast and fed me with brine for soup and angered me and talked back to me and disobeyed my orders. Just like you did today: you told me you'd gone to the village to buy some eggs, but actually you'd been fooling about in the woods with a young man. Is that what you want me to give you several thousand rubles for?"

"If I'm as bad as all that, why don't you send me away?" she put in, pouting.

"Send you away? Ha, but you're not so very bad a maid nor I so very bad a master! I'm a good man, Maarja, mind you, a very good man."

He gave a wheezing chuckle, while his moist, trembling hand rose to Maarja's white neck and his fingers tickled her chin.

"If you were really a good man," she said, putting on a frown and stepping back, "then you'd promise to help Mait and me get married soon. Mait wants to get on his feet, to set up a shop or buy a small ship—"

"Oh, I see—in that case he must need a rich wife, of course. Now I remember that he talked to me about it. Look, Maarja, that means you'll have to give up all your hopes, and I'm glad it's so, very glad indeed."

Maarja lowered her head to conceal the change that had come into her face. But a moment later she boldly stuck up her chin again.

"I don't have to give up any hopes at all," she said defiantly. "I've never given myself idle hopes. Besides, I'm not as poor as people think. And now stop talking to me about Mait—I don't want him and I'm not going to run after him or anybody else."

"What! Is my pretty little housekeeper getting angry?" he laughed, and took hold of the girl's sleeve again. "Come here, be a nice girl again and make it up with your master. You won't be sorry if you do, under-

stand? Come on, let's make peace, I'm quite satisfied with you—with both your service and your pretty face."

He tried to put his arm round her waist, but she slipped away and ran out of the room, laughing ringingly.

He sat looking at the kitchen door, behind which she had disappeared, as if he expected her to come running back, full of mischief. But she only popped her head in and showed him her laughing face. He smiled at her and beckoned to her with a finger. As she would not obey he got up and shuffled towards the door, which she, however, naughtily shut with a bang after pulling a long nose at him. Sinking back into his soft leather arm-chair, he began to rub his moist hands and wet one lip with the other, hemming again and again with a nervous smile.

Next morning—it happened to be a holiday—Mait came to say good-bye to Anderson. He wore a fine suit of blue cloth, and his grave, manly, if somewhat cold and indifferent face, set in a thick black beard, was fresh from the morning wash and looked as white as a gentleman's. Sunshine and wind had not yet browned his face, but he was handsome even with a tan. His big, powerful frame and fine stature were likewise imposing.

Anderson, who had just got up, sat in his dressing-gown in the arm-chair, puffing at a little fragrant cigar as he waited for his morning coffee when Mait walked in. The seaman had no sooner closed the door behind him than Maarja brought in the breakfast on a nickel-plated tray.

Anderson had not yet seen her that day, nor had Mait. The skipper stared at her, and then burst out laughing—a laugh that was not without a note of annoyance.

"You must be going to some grand party," he said. "Oh, yes, I see!" he added, smiling at Mait. "Take a

look, Nākisaar, take a look! If you aren't an ass you'll realize what's come over my Maarja."

The girl blushed, and from under the lowered eyelids her eyes flashed angrily at the mocker. As for Mait, he deliberately swung round his big bulk and looked at Maarja's brand-new pink dress. He began with the flounce on her skirt and slowly raised his eyes over her hips and breasts to her face and her fair, neatly combed hair, whose waved curls fringed her ruddy cheeks with lovely ringlets.

"Don't you know it's Sunday today?" he replied at last dryly.

"And that's all? Well, well!" said Anderson, and his eyes shifted with obvious pleasure from Maarja to the impassive seaman.

Mait told him why he had come, and said that he must hurry because he had left a cart waiting for him on the road. At the skipper's bidding Maarja took a bottle of rum from the cupboard, filled the glasses, and the two men tossed down a parting draught. Anderson said he was happy to have had Mait's company during the winter, and Mait thanked him briefly for his friendship and hospitality. Then they drank a toast to a happy meeting in the future.

"Damn!" cried Anderson. "We forgot all about our pleasant companion! Where's your glass, Maarja? Get it, quick!"

She fetched a third glass. As she did so she thought of those dull evenings when Mait had played cards with the old bachelor into the small hours, without ever taking notice of her, except when the skipper told her to bring this or take away that, or to pour some more wine. She had always found work to do on those evenings, tidying up and cleaning and putting things in order, being loth to stay in the kitchen or go to bed even though Anderson dismissed her. When there was

nothing left to do in the card-room she had got busy in the adjoining rooms. And she had looked at the players through the half-open door, wondering at the eagerness with which they carried it on, admiring Mait's fine beard and broad shoulders, and the imperious ring in his booming voice. . . .

The skipper filled her glass.

"Here's to our pretty Maarja!"

The three glasses touched with one friendly clink. Maarja took a sip, and her cheeks glowed even more nicely.

"And now kiss Mait good-bye!" commanded the skipper.

"Who? Me?" cried Maarja with shining eyes, which she, however, hastened to veil with her eyelashes.

"I won't listen to any objections! It's your duty."

"No, it isn't," she resisted coyly. "I've taken no such duty upon myself."

"Are you going to give in to this headstrong girl, Mait?" said Anderson to egg him on, while his face showed that he would have been happy to step into Mait's shoes.

"I won't have it against her will," Mait replied with a smile, standing calmly on his strong legs.

"What! You won't? But you must! Come on, Mait, be a man!"

Anderson was holding Maarja, but still Mait hesitated, and finally the girl lost her patience and tried to break loose.

"Let her go, Mr. Anderson," Mait said. "It isn't right with another looking on, anyway. There, she's almost crying— We'll do it some other time."

"Really, you're as cool as a whale!" laughed Anderson, releasing the girl. "Well, do as you like. Good-bye and good luck—let's have another swig before you go."

The two men exchanged a firm handshake, drank another glass, and bidding a warm good-bye to Maarja, Mait hurried out of the skipper's house.

"You know, Maarja, you could give me that kiss Mait wouldn't have," the skipper said jokingly as soon as he found himself alone with the girl.

"That Mait wouldn't have?" she snapped. "Who would have given him one?"

"Anyway, I don't mind taking it."

"But you won't get it."

"Surely you can't be so stingy and stubborn over a harmless little joke!"

"Yes, I'm very stingy."

"What's your price, then?"

"Not less—not less than—" She counted on her fingers and laughed ringingly.

"Well, how much?"

"Oh, let's say—three thousand rubles."

"Three thousand!" cried the old bachelor. "That's enough money to gild you with!"

"I think it's a low price. I may ask still more."

"But I'm going to haggle."

"I won't knock off a single kopek—not half a kopek!" she teased him. "You've got money enough! What's an old bachelor like you going to do with such a lot? You may die any day, and you haven't got any children or relatives."

"Is that so? Then what would *you* do with such a lot of money?"

"Why do you ask? Don't you know?"

"I see!" he replied, and began to rub his hands; then he suddenly fell to thinking.

As for the girl, she turned her back on him and walked out of the room, her head tilted up perkily.

Maarja's temper and habits had changed a great deal lately. She would be exceedingly gay and playful and full of mischief one moment, and brusque, cold and reticent the next. One mood would abruptly give way to another. She would for half an hour laugh and joke and play pranks on her good-natured master, and then her face would suddenly cloud, she would talk bitingly, would reject his jokes, become deaf and dumb and stony. Such a change occurred at times twice an hour, and she would continue in that state for weeks or months at a time. And since the sickly bachelor also had crotchets, their relations were becoming rather tangled, and it often came to violent quarrels.

But, strange as it may seem, Anderson was so forbearing that he never so much as dropped a hint about discharging the girl. Indeed, he was so used to her that he seemed to be afraid that she might go, all the more because she now did her duties much more carefully than before, which surprised him not a little. He no longer had any reason to grumble about lack of industry on her part, about her long absences, or about ill-cooked food. She was the first to have made his life agreeable and comfortable.

Whether unintentionally or deliberately—there was no telling—Maarja had begun to pay more attention to her appearance. She now wore such clean skirts, such nice light cotton blouses, such snow-white pinafores, and even on weekdays she put red beads round her plump neck. In the morning she came out of her kitchen-room with her hair beautifully done; like a real young lady, she even knew how to comb a curly bang down on to her forehead, thereby actually achieving a certain degree of elegance. The skipper liked her very much that way. She had noticed it and used to smile coquettishly at him. Ever since he had complimented her on the dimples that formed when she laughed she

had been in the habit of laughing and smiling as often as she possibly could. She took his flattery and compliments as if they did not mean much to her, but a keen observer would have noticed that his every word went home. As long as her good humour lasted—or as long as she let it last—she put up with all of the skipper's jokes. But suddenly her mood would change as has been said, and she would become as unfeeling as a block of wood. This annoyed and puzzled Anderson, and he thought a good deal about it.

Maarja, who had a clear, easy soprano, was a member of the local mixed choir. She sang frequently, and Anderson enjoyed her singing. Usually she did it sitting by the open kitchen window, and her songs, full of melancholy and yearning, carried far, to the woods and the sea. The woods were scented with the perfume of spring, the sea rippled beckoningly between the trees, the air was as soft as down, and as warm and sweet as fresh milk, and the heady fragrance of flowers and the happy twitter of birds floated excitingly from the garden into the house through the open windows.

On such evenings the sick, sallow-faced skipper would be relaxing languorously in his arm-chair. He would watch and listen, and listen and watch, and a strange agitation would mount in his breast with every passing moment. Maarja's singing put his feelings in a turmoil and set his blood rushing in a warm surge.

"Maarja, come and sing here inside!" he used to call to her.

"No."

"Why not?"

"No."

"Please come—do me the favour!"

"I won't!"

"I'll give you a present."

"What?"

"Anything you wish."

Maarja would give a laugh, at once mocking, incredulous and provocative.

"I might want too much, sir."

"Just tell me what it is."

"I don't know myself at the moment."

"Some money, perhaps?"

"Would you give that too?"

"Yes. How much do you want?"

She gave that teasing laugh again. He waited for her to come out of the kitchen. She did not come out. Then he shambled to the kitchen, leaning on his cane, and pulled her out by the hand. She resisted, but not excessively. He actually gave her some money—the crumpled bill disappeared in her fist—and then she sang at the open window in her master's room, exactly as long as she chose to. Sometimes she slyly cut it short to draw a fresh bribe from him. After all, he was a rich man and clearly enjoyed his maid's beauty and singing immensely.

After an exciting evening like that, the skipper found it hard to fall asleep. He just could not sleep in spite of the morphia he took before going to bed. Then, like the addict he was, he gave himself a stiff dose. He called it his "sleeping-draught," the only name by which Maarja knew it.

"Maarja!" he called from his bed, fitted out with heavy hangings.

"What do you want?"

"A glass of cold water!"

"At this time of night?"

"Please!"

The kitchen door opened, and presently a bare arm pushed aside the curtain to put a glass of water on the little table at the head of the bed. Suddenly the skipper

seized the hand, pressed it to his hot, moist cheek, and then, as his hot lips touched the bare white arm, the girl jerked it back.

23d August 1886

"my Own Dear mait nägisar
by this short Letter i give you regards in my mind and wish you al the best tho i carnt See you nor hold your hand nor kiss you and now my arnt is ded and the sad nuse brakes my Hart and my poor dear arnt hoom i alwes luvd so much and hoo luvd me as if I was her own childe tho she livd in faraway fin land and had never seen me and id never seen her my mother spoke to me abowt her but verry seldom and she has now left me 1 thowsand 5 hundred roobls and maybe I shal get mor hwen evrithing is sold and you no theres a lot mor left a house and other propperty and hwen evrithing is sold i shal probbly get even more and im pritty shure i shal and now iv got 1 thowsand 5 hundred roobls for shure and if you dont find enny ritcher wooman and if you luv me at al then wiv got 1 thowsand 5 hundred roobls to start with and if afterwords i get mor like i feel pritty shure i shal then cnny man wil be glad to have me and my luv for you wil never dy becos you ar my life and happines and hope and without you id much rather ly ded in my cold grave so let me no hwots on your mind and think hwot you swor to me becos a man is jujd by his words and a bul by its horns.

"with menny luvving kisses and pressing you to my faithfull hart and waiting for a joyos and frendly reply i remain with the verry best regards from the bottom of my fond hart and wishing you the best of luck and good helth yours for ever Marie Koid.

"o my luv mait nägisar im afraid youl say that 1 thowsand 5 hundred roobls isnt enuf but il realy get mor afterwords god willing."

Maarja put down the pen, whose holder was stained with ink halfway up, her thumb and two fingers being no cleaner, licked up a few blots from the sheet and re-read the letter, her cheeks glowing. Putting the sheet in an envelope and sealing it carefully, she took a postage stamp from a drawer of the skipper's desk, licked it, pressed it to the envelope with her palm, and throwing her shawl over her shoulders, made to steal out of the house with the letter.

The skipper was taking his afternoon nap in his bedroom. But he was not asleep, for Maarja heard him calling:

"Where are you going, dear?"

"I'm going out," she replied.

"Where to?"

"I told you I was going out."

"But where to?"

"That's no business of yours!"

She left. She hurried along through the pine wood, descended the steep shore and walked on towards the village along the edge of the alder grove, leaving the rolling sea on her left. She was going to get Mait's address from his father. When she had secured it she called at the school-house, in the middle of the village. The schoolmaster wrote the address on the envelope for her—the letter was to go as far as Cardiff in Britain. He laughed and teased her for writing to Mait, but she said earnestly and rather proudly:

"Mait is my fiancé, so why can't I write to him?"

"Not really? Well, then it's different, of course."

"There's something I wanted to ask," she said, changing the subject, and was glad to see a few villagers come in. "Where can I deposit my money on interest? Shall I put it in a credit bank, in 'Linda,' or some other place?"

"Whose money do you mean?" he asked, smiling.

"My own money. I suppose you haven't heard yet that my old widowed aunt died a short while ago? She lived since her childhood in Finland, in the town of Dünaburg. Just imagine, she's left me some little money, bless her soul, and when her house is sold I'll get some more—I don't know how much. So I'd like to know which is the best place to deposit money on interest—I may get the money pretty soon, because I've already got all the legal papers."

"Just listen to her," put in one of the villagers, who had been listening to her in amazement, "listen to the story she's telling us! Who's ever heard that you had a well-to-do aunt in Finland?"

"I don't care whether you've heard about it or not, Kakuta Priidik. But I know very well that my poor mother had a stepsister who left Tallinn with her parents for Finland when she was a little girl and there married a shipmaster. My aunt's name was Mrs. To—Ta—Te—I can't pronounce that foreign name."

"But the town of Dünaburg isn't in Finland at all," remarked the schoolmaster in his turn.

Maarja rubbed her forehead with a finger.

"Dünaburg? Did I say Dünaburg? I didn't, I said Sveaborg—that's it, Sveaborg!" she insisted.

"Sveaborg is a small rock fortress, your aunt could hardly—"

"Then I must have forgotten the name of the town, too," she smiled, unperturbed.

"Perhaps you meant to say Viborg? That one is in Finland," suggested the schoolmaster.

"Of course Viborg! That's the name I gave, isn't it? No? Then I made a slip. Viborg, sure enough! I can never remember those difficult names. But now I must be going, the old man's probably fretting at home."

And although she had not found out where she could deposit her money most profitably, she made to go.

"How much money do you expect to get, anyway?" asked another villager.

"A nice sum. Otherwise I wouldn't have talked about it at all. Would you like me to give you account of every single kopek, Tuiallika Paavel?"

She turned and walked out.

At home Anderson met her by the kitchen door.

"Child, why were you so rude to me?" he asked tenderly.

"Was I?"

"Don't you remember? Then you didn't mean to be rude."

"I really didn't, Paul."

"Then let's make it up again. Come here, let's make it up—come on!"

Maarja walked smiling over to him, and they made it up.

Poor Maarja had to wait more than two months before she received a reply from Mait. Having to wait two months for a reply to *such* a letter—could there be any torture worse than that? Maarja tried daily to reassure herself, thinking that he was very far away, perhaps at the other end of the world, and that a letter took long to get there. Nevertheless, misgivings gnawed at her heart: perhaps he just did not care, perhaps he thought the sum was too small.... But finally he did reply. An educated person would have seen from the name of the town and the date that the letter had taken only five days to reach its destination. But Maarja did not know where Havre is on the map, nor did it occur to her to check and see that, according to the foreign calendar, the letter had been mailed on November 15th.

This is what Mait wrote: "Dear Maarja, I'm very glad you have become a well-to-do girl and I wish you happiness and a good and peaceful life. You'll have

plenty of suitors now. There'll be plenty of men who are willing to marry a girl with a 1,500 ruble fortune. And if you come across a man who is to your liking and honest and sensible and who isn't just after your money, and if you feel the least bit drawn to him, then the wisest thing to do is to accept him, and that's all there is to it. Why place so many hopes in a man who may become food for fish any day, who, moreover, has the cheek to be looking for a rich wife and no other, and who has an ugly ambition as I have? I say this to you as a true friend and out of brotherly love. But if you, dear Maarja, still want to hold me to my word, then don't call me a liar this year yet, because I still have almost two years left, as agreed between us. I'm not coming back home this winter, because my job won't let me and I'll have to stay abroad. But you may do as your good sense and pure heart tell you."

In conclusion he sent his regards to all relatives, friends and acquaintances, including Anderson, and signed simply: "Good-bye, your friend Mait Näkisaar." He did not even give his next address.

When she began to read the letter Maarja's face flushed, then as she went on the colour drained from her cheeks, and when she had finished reading the poor girl broke into tears. She wept long and pitifully. During the next few days the sympathetic old skipper noticed that her eyes were red from crying. He got no reply to his questions, much as he pleaded with her.

"He calls me a *well-to-do* girl—just a *well-to-do* girl," she told herself in anguish, turning the thought over and over in her mind and finding no comfort in it. That was just it—*well-to-do* but not *rich*! To him a thousand and five hundred rubles made her no more than a well-to-do woman. Since he wanted his wife to be *rich*, she wondered how much he expected her to own. He didn't seem to believe in what she had written to

him about the money she expected to get besides—at any rate he was doubtful about it. His letter was so cool, and almost mocking, too! Fresh tears welled up in her eyes.

Nevertheless, she gradually derived some relief from the letter: first of all because Mait promised to keep his word—at least for as long as he had pledged it—and secondly because he said he would not come home that winter. Why it was good that he was not coming back that winter was something that she alone knew.

She wrote back to Mait only six weeks later. That was probably as long as it had taken her to think it over and wrestle with her problems and have her late aunt's estate sold. Once again she got Mait's latest address from his father, to whom he had written a short while before, and then mailed the letter, which ran in effect as follows:

She was happy to be able to tell him that her share of her aunt's heritage made up five thousand rubles in cash. It was the sale of house and land that had brought her more money. But on top of that her aunt had left her furniture, household utensils, clothes, jewelry and many other things. She would soon make a trip to take them over in full measure and proper condition. Was Mait going to call her just "well-to-do" even now? If he meant at all to keep his oath and not to become a liar or deceiver, then he ought to know what he had to do. Her heart burning with love, his faithful Maarja was looking forward to his return in spring. With the sum in question Mait could undertake whatever he wished. The daughter of many a baron could hardly boast a bigger dowry, and so on.

Early in January Maarja went to Finland by way of Tallinn. She stayed there for five weeks. Settling an in-

heritance is such a troublesome and lengthy business. The skipper had hired another maid, and although Maarja had not completed her term of service he had graciously allowed her to go. Indeed, how could anyone make a rich young lady like her stay on in his service! However, Anderson's friendliness and kindness to Miss Koid went even further than that. He suggested amiably that when she came back from Finland she could, instead of putting up in a peasant hut while waiting for the arrival of her fiancé, live in her former master's house till the wedding. For that purpose he had the smallest of his four living-rooms, isolated from the others, put in order. Maarja accepted the offer gladly, for where else could a parentless young woman prepare for her wedding better than under the roof of her former employer and under his fatherly care?

She brought from her trip a great deal of luggage. Her trunks and suitcases and boxes were all brand-new, and full of nice new things, which the skipper's new maid, Leena Kops, to whom Maarja with shining eyes displayed her property, could not admire enough. As she clasped her big red hands and clicked her tongue, searching for more words to voice her praise, her eyes were full of deep envy, and this gladdened Maarja's heart more than all of Leena's praise and admiration.

The trip had brought a great change over Maarja. Her face had grown thinner and more pallid, which, however, had improved rather than impaired her looks, for now there was in her face something that set her apart from the peasant girls. This impression was greatly enhanced by the new clothes which she had brought with her. They were fashionable, and they set off her plump and yet shapely figure to much greater advantage than those she had worn before. In her new clothes she was like a town girl. And when she had enjoyed her wealth a little longer she could easily be-

come a real young lady. For clothes lend polish and distinction. In fact, some young ladies owe all the polish they have to the clothes they wear.

Anderson's health had deteriorated while Maarja was away. His face had become more sallow and wrinkled than ever before. And there was such a mournful, such a pained look in his eyes which seemed to be floating in fat. His hands shook more violently, and his nerves had become so high-strung that he kept rising from one chair only to drop into another, wandering restlessly from room to room, wrangling with the maid and finding fault with and grumbling at everything.

When Maarja walked in his face lit up as with sunshine.

"The Lord be praised!" he cried, and a weight seemed to lift from his heart.

He squeezed both her hands and searched her eyes with tender scrutiny.

"Everything all right?" he asked, and his face seemed to soften as if his heart were melting with a deep emotion.

She made no answer but merely bit her upper lip and turned away her face. A glistening tear rolled down her cheek like a drop of silver and fell into the folds of her new blue woollen dress.

"Are you crying, child? I understand."

He tried to take her hands, but she pushed him aside and went off into the other room, the one which the good skipper had assigned to her.

A while later he knocked at her door. She asked without opening what he wanted.

"There's a letter from Mait," he replied. "It came about two weeks ago."

The door opened at once, and Maarja's white hand took the letter. Anderson went back to his room, and she began to read her fiancé's letter.

Very briefly Mait informed her that he would come home in spring, as soon as the Gulf of Finland was free of ice. That was all. He wished her good luck and sent regards to his people.

Nor did Maarja ask for more.

"He's coming!" she told herself joyfully, and when a few minutes later she joined the skipper her eyes were sparkling and there was a healthy flush on her face.

"I was waiting for you," said the skipper. On seeing Maarja come in, he had sprung up eagerly from the arm-chair into which he had dropped after shuffling restlessly back and forth. "Sit by my side and listen quietly to what I've got to tell you, I want to shake off this burden. I can't bear it any longer."

She sat down at the window and leaned her fair head against the jamb.

"What burden?" she asked calmly.

"First of all, where is he?"

"Don't worry about that," she whispered, and turned her face to the window.

"Very good. I won't ask any more questions now. Tell me, what does he write you?"

"He says he's coming back in spring."

"Does he?"

Anderson ran his hands over his crown once or twice, walked hurriedly from wall to wall, then pulled a chair up to the window and with a broken sigh sat down beside the girl. For a while he sat gazing at her in silence and, strangely enough, his ugly face seemed transformed.

"Maarja, you are dear to me," he began in a low voice, almost shamefacedly. "I hadn't realized that till you went away. I can't begin to tell you how much I suffered while you were gone."

He crossed his arms on his chest and looked down with melancholy eyes. After a brief pause he continued:

"I saw that it wasn't just habit, even though I *am* used to you and missed you terribly. What I'm going to confess to you is more than that. Do you see what I mean, Maarja?"

He bent to one side and looked at the girl with an oddly entreating air.

"It's love, Maarja," he said in a half-whisper. "Please don't be angry with me, don't laugh at me, don't be offended, let me finish! I love you—I don't know when it came, but I've loved you dearly, I've loved you more than ever, since that thing happened not so long ago. You're now so dear to me that I—I could never part with you!"

He had uttered the last sentence with vehement emphasis, rising from his seat in agitation. His eyes had brightened.

"What do you mean?" Maarja asked slowly, and a white veil seemed to cover her cheeks.

"Just that you're mine, that I won't give you up to anybody, that by becoming my wife you've become one with my soul. I have a greater title to you than anybody else, and I'm not going to forgo it. I've trembled for your life and prayed to God for your salvation. I see you as my wife whether sleeping or awake, and that's what you shall become before people."

She was speechless. She had never dreamed that the skipper could have such intentions. Was he joking or was he not in his right mind?

"And what if I don't agree?" she cried out in fright.

Anderson sat down again. He did not touch Maarja with so much as a finger, but he brought his face close to her breast and whispered, as meekly and pleadingly as a little child:

"You must do as I say because I beg you! You'll be happy with me because I love you. You won't lack anything because I'm rich. You'll soon be rid of me and then you can marry the man you love. I'm sick and shan't last long. You'll inherit all I have and will be rich. And you'll get that wealth very soon, too!"

He held his breath, waiting for her to answer. But as she was silent he said sorrowfully:

"I'm sick and shan't last long. I promise to die soon. Then you'll be a rich widow, beautiful and gay, and completely free."

Maarja seemed to wake up from a nightmare. She shook her head—first slowly, thoughtfully, then more and more resolutely.

"No!" she said at last.

"No?" he echoed dejectedly.

"No."

He leaned back heavily in his chair. He closed his eyes as if exhausted, and said nothing. The expression on his face changed abruptly to bitter annoyance, then to deep resentment and finally to venomous anger. His face became ugly again—so ugly that Maarja averted her eyes.

"You forget, child, that I needn't really ask you," he said in an entirely different voice. "I can be as cruel as I'm kind. I can be as hard-headed as I'm tractable. Bear that in mind, Maarja. You forget that I'm still keeping your money—"

She sprang up with a stifled cry.

"Paul!"

A malicious smile curled the skipper's livid lips. Slowly he said, "I can leave that money in my keeping for ever, you know. Don't you think so?"

She did not utter a word but stared at him with terrified eyes.

"And then," he added coldly, "you forget that I can open Mait's eyes for him."

A fit of torpor overwhelmed the girl. But it was amazing how quickly she got the better of it. She pondered. And it took her only a few seconds to make up her mind. "He loves me, I can see that," it flashed across her mind. "And as long as he loves me nothing is lost and I can get all I want. A lover can't resist long—he gives in as soon as you threaten that you'll leave him. So don't worry, Maarja, he *will* give in."

"I'll never do as you wish, you may do anything you like," she said. "I could never have dreamed that you were such a liar and swindler. I tell you once more: never! Do you understand—never! I'll stick to my decision no matter what becomes of me, no matter what you do in your cruelty. From this hour on I won't have anything to do with you. I'll leave this house as soon as I can find another place to live."

She had spoken coldly, in a calm and firm voice, much as her heart was seething and burning with anger. With measured step she hurried out of the room. Pity that she did not see the way in which the skipper looked after her, for she would have known at once who was winning, and would have stopped worrying about her decision.

When the door had closed behind the girl Anderson swept the room with frightened, helpless eyes. His body sagged more and more, and he now looked old, frightfully old, and wretchedly ugly.

They had not reached any specific agreement, and apparently neither of them had come to any final decision as to what should be done to clear up things between them. Nevertheless, they did not part, hoping that time would bring a solution. At the skipper's request Maarja stayed in the house, and at her request he transferred her securities to her. It was hard to say

whether Anderson had thereby gone back on his intention to marry Maarja. That was something that Maarja herself could not tell. The skipper had no need for the money since he had another effective means of forcing the girl's hand—revealing her secret to Mait. For money meant nothing to Maarja unless she got that man. To be sure, she had seen that with money she could buy fine clothes, but that was all. That was the only value that she set on wealth. After all, in her own obscure village rich farmers lived exactly like those who had nothing but their daily bread. Tõntsu, a wealthy estate-owner, ate the same kind of broth, wore the same home-made clothes, bought for his daughters the same kind of kerchiefs, as Antsu, who leased a small farmstead. Under those circumstances wealth was definitely useless. The only goal which Maarja expected to attain by means of her wealth was to get Mait, to buy him for husband.

The nearer the spring drew, the more Anderson's health deteriorated and the more dangerously his bodily strength dwindled. True, things with him had always taken a turn for the worse in spring, but never before had the sick man felt so bad as that year. By early May he had become so weak that he could no longer rise from bed. It might be that his vigour was being sapped not only by illness, but also by mental pain, for he could often be heard sighing and praying. He asked continuously for Maarja, who was thoroughly bored with sitting at his bedside and lulling him to sleep by singing softly. Lately he had been telling her to sing spiritual songs, forbidding her, however, to sing such as spoke of death.

One rainy, murky night a loud shriek rang out twice from the sick-room, a shriek that might have come from a man attacked by a murderer. Leena started up from her bed, on which she had been dozing without undressing, and rushed to her master's room.

Anderson in his underwear was kneeling in the middle of the room. His ravaged face was a ghastly yellow, his glassy, staring eyes were full of boundless terror. He was trembling all over, and held his hands clasped on his head. In the dim light of the night lamp he looked so frightful that even the stout-hearted, sedate Leena was terrified.

"Good God, what's the matter with the master?" she cried from the doorway, fearful of drawing nearer.

Slowly, with a kind of superstitious fear, the sick man turned to stare at Leena's figure. He was clearly wrestling to recover his calm and conceal his trembling. He tried to rise to his feet, but was too weak. Leena came to his aid.

"Help me to get into bed, there's—there's nothing wrong with me, really—"

When he had crawled into bed and Leena had carefully covered him up with the blanket he said in a calmer but still shaky voice, "Why doesn't Maarja come? Tell her to come here!"

Leena did as she was told, and after a while Maarja stepped into the room. She looked sullen, and pretended to be terribly sleepy, though she had heard the sick man's shriek just as clearly as Leena.

"Sit by my side, Maarja, I must talk to you," the skipper said, in as earnest and firm a tone as he could muster.

Maarja sat by the bedside and shiveringly pulled about her the shawl which she had thrown over her shoulders. She did not say anything.

"Maarja, do you believe that there is in heaven an eternal judge who punishes everyone for his sins, who metes out a heavy retribution for every misdeed? I believe there is, because that judge has appeared before me. He'd never done it before and I'd forgotten him, but now—now that he's calling me— I can't give you an idea.

of the frightful dreams that have been tormenting me for many nights, and I've begun to see terrible ghosts even in broad daylight. That's all because of the sin we've committed, it's a warning to you and me."

He spoke in a clear, impressive voice, but his eyes kept staring at the ceiling as if he were delirious.

Maarja shook herself like a hen that has dug itself into sand.

"I'm sure it all comes from your sleeping-draught. You inject and swallow such a lot of it," she said dryly.

"No, Maarja, that isn't it. Don't you know that people who are near their end can see things that are hidden from other people? And that a dying man's soul can feel what's in store for it? I believe in the heavenly judge because I saw him a little while ago looking down from the clouds, pointing at you and me with a finger that blazed like fire, and Satan was sneering at us, and started dragging us down into his kingdom—"

"It's just a sick man's imagination, that's all," Maarja said under her breath. She sat motionless, as if afraid to look about her.

"Imagination and ghosts—granted, but they have a deep meaning of their own. Are you trying to tell me that you aren't afraid of punishment, or that you have nothing to fear?"

"I'll deal with that. But, really, what great sin have I committed?"

A half-surprised, half-deprecating smile quivered on the sick man's lips. He made no comment. Then he fixed his eyes on Maarja with sad entreaty.

"Believe me, Maarja, I shan't rise from this sick-bed any more, I know I shan't. They're calling me—I can hear the caller's voice. Give me your hand, Maarja."

She did.

"Let's get married before I die," he said softly, coaxingly. "I've already told you how dear you are to me.

But now it isn't carnal love that prompts me to suggest this to you, but much loftier, much more sacred reasons. There are several of them. In the first place, I want to give my child a father and mother. He must never think of his parents with contempt, mustn't know them to have been depraved and sullied by vice. Do you realize how sacred this consideration is?"

She made no reply.

"Another reason," continued the skipper, "concerns first of all you. Is it possible that you're thinking of covering up your old sin with a new one, to hide the evil you've done under a new evil? Would you really have the heart to deceive so cruelly the man you love? Do you think you could live by his side for years and years with a burden like that weighing on your mind? How could you ever look him in the face? How would you feel as you put your arms round his neck? Answer me!"

Maarja had pulled up her shawl to hide her face.

"I hope I'll deal with that too," she said from behind the shawl.

"You think so?"

"I—hope so."

"Poor child! What if your hopes are dashed? Just think what'll happen if your transgression comes out. What then? But if you are really so hard-hearted that you could find peace and coolly add new sins to the old ones, tell lies till your dying day and deceive the man who trusts and perhaps even loves you—if *you* are capable of such a thing, then *I* am not. Your fiancé is my friend. *I* can't deceive him. I'd feel very sorry if I did. He may marry my widow, but he mustn't marry my—my mistress. I shall see to that as a Christian and a friend. I swear to you that I'll be as good as my word. Don't you now think that we ought to get married? The minister'll be here tomorrow."

A deep silence ensued. It was broken only by the sick man's laborious, wheezing respiration and the patter of the rain outside. Anderson could read nothing from Maarja's face, for it was turned aside and veiled by the shawl. All that he noticed was that she was plucking at the shawl with her fingers. Not a word passed her lips.

It was a bitter, all but angry look that the skipper turned on the girl's motionless figure.

"I also wish to point out, though it goes without saying, that as my widow you'd inherit all my fortune, and it's rather sizable. Otherwise you'll have to get along with your own five thousand rubles—that is, unless I take it away from you to make over to my child."

Maarja got up.

"What if you should *not* die?"

The question hit the sick man like a whip-stroke on the face. He sat up, and his dimmed eyes flared up. Then he burst out laughing. The hoarse, hollow rattle of that laughter was terrible to hear in the stillness of the half-dark room, at dead of night.

"I want to know your decision," he said at last in a harsh, imperious tone.

"I'd like to think it over," she replied.

"How long?"

"Till the doctor comes."

And she hurried out of the room.

"'Till the doctor comes,'" echoed the skipper, and dropped back on to the pillows. "She doesn't trust me, she thinks I'm trying to deceive her."

That same night Anderson's condition took such an appalling turn for the worse that another moment's delay in calling the doctor might spell disaster. It was the skipper's own fault that the doctor had not been consulted till then—he disliked doctors because they cen-

sured people for using morphia. Besides, since this time he felt certain that he must die, what good would a doctor be? And it was not he who sent for the doctor, but the steward of a neighbouring estate, an old acquaintance of his, who had come to see him after a long absence. The moment he set eyes on the sick man he sent a messenger from the estate to fetch a doctor from town. As for Anderson, he sent only for the minister.

Both arrived at the same time. After a lengthy examination of his patient the doctor came out of the sick-room and sent Anderson's day-labourer to the chemist's on horseback.

"Excuse me, doctor," said Maarja in a pleading voice. "May I ask if our master will live?"

The doctor looked grave, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He glanced absent-mindedly at the maid who was so worried about her master's health, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr. Anderson is very dangerously ill," he replied. "I'm worried about his weakness. It seems that you haven't been feeding him well. But there's still hope that he'll live."

Maarja had been told that doctors always talked like that, even when they knew for certain that the patient was doomed. She heard the doctor with eager attention, and the minister's black figure—he sat in the drawing-room attired in his cassock, waiting to be called to the sick-bed—no longer seemed so very terrible to her. She hurried into the sick-room, where only the faithful Leena had been in charge so far.

But she did not go in there to tend the sick man. She merely wanted to see with her own eyes how far the illness had progressed since the night, when she had last seen him. The skipper lay on his back, breathing fitfully, his eyes closed. Yes, he was now no more than a shadow that must disappear before long. How

could anyone so sick recover? How could an old wreck like that live on much longer? No, no! Don't worry, Maarja!

But still she was uneasy. Bending low over the sick man, she bit him like a snake with a question that she hissed in his ear.

"Do you feel that you're dying, Paul?"

He opened his eyes—what eyes! Could she muster enough strength to withstand that long, knowing gaze that was so full of poisoned love, deep sorrow and burning contempt?

"Don't worry, I'm dying."

His eyes were still searching Maarja's ice-cold face, apparently trying to discover in it something worthy of love or respect. But he did not seem to find what he was looking for. He closed his eyes again; two tears stole slowly between his eyelashes, and rolled down his wrinkled, sallow cheeks. Stopping in the deeper furrows, they glistened there until Leena came in and gently dried them with a white handkerchief.

When the maid had stepped back Maarja drew near the sick-bed again. Once more she stooped over the skipper and shouted into his ear, "I'm obedient and I'll fulfil your last wish: I will marry you."

First of all the sick man wanted to confess. Briefly but with sincere repentance he gave the minister an account of his relationship with Maarja. Their sinful union had unfortunately borne sinful fruit. The child was being brought up in a Tallinn family. Its father had made arrangements for its future in his will. Would the minister please—the sick man begged him humbly for it—take care of the little one's spiritual happiness if the mother should live in the neighbourhood? And then Anderson begged the minister in moving accents

to marry him to his accomplice in keeping with religion and law, so that the child should have parents whom he would never be ashamed to think of.

The minister comforted the dying man, absolved his sinful love and administered the last rites. And after he had reproved the skipper's accomplice in a few words—Maarja pretended to be crying, though there were no tears in her dry, glittering eyes—the brief and simple wedding ceremony was held. Before the messenger could bring the medicines from the chemist's Captain Paul Anderson and Maarja Koid were joined in lawful wedlock.

As man and wife they were admitted among respectable people. Death alone could part them.

At the same hour Mait Näkisaar came home.

Maarja did not know that he had returned, nor did Mait know what had happened. And she had been waiting for him, and now he had come to take her. What would now happen if—?

It is hard to say what mental and physical factors brought about such a wonderful change in Anderson's condition that the doctor, who stayed by his bedside throughout the following night, was able to state in the morning that after a violent crisis the illness had taken a turn for recovery. But there must be some spiritual regeneration at the root of the change, for immediately after the wedding the doctor had seen his patient gradually regain his calm, though the pain he felt had hardly abated. The skipper seemed to have taken heart and grown stronger inwardly, which helped him to resist the pain. On the following night he succeeded in sleeping for a few hours—with the aid of morphia, which the doctor himself had found necessary to resort to. And when he awoke he felt to his immense

surprise as if there were new blood flowing through his veins.

Nobody—neither the doctor, Leena nor the day-labourer—watched to see how Anderson's wife took the news. They all were glad because a fellow-man, who had been in the clutches of death, had got out of danger, and probably took it for granted that his young bride was happy too.

"Good Lord!" Leena sighed, folding her arms on her breast. "The fortune that has fallen into that girl's lap! Got a rich gentleman for husband as by a miracle! Now try to tell anybody that a country girl can't become a lady! What a funny man the captain is!"

But the young "lady's" face remained as pallid and impenetrable as it had been after the wedding. Not the slightest colour came into her cheeks when the doctor announced that at the moment there was no reason for concern about the sick man's life.

At the moment. That must mean till the end of that day. Because a doctor could not trust an improvement that had come so suddenly. Often such a change was just a flicker of the candle of life before going out. The doctor had intimated as much to the young bride. Her cheeks glowed as she thought of it.

During the day the doctor was called to the neighbouring estate to examine an employce's sick child. He gave Maarja and Leena instructions on how to tend the sick man, and promised to come back for the night. However, he wanted to be sent for at once if anything untoward should occur.

After he had left, the young bride took up her post by the sick-bed. The skipper longed for her company and she was obedient, as she had said herself. They did not talk much; Anderson seemed content with having his wife by his side and being able to look at her face.

His eyes no longer reflected gloomy thoughts, and his gaze was clear and peaceful.

"Feeling better?" Maarja began after a long silence that had oppressed her. "The Lord be praised," she added in a strangely high-pitched voice.

Anderson smiled ruefully.

"Better? I'm better now. But what I predicted holds. No temporary improvement can help me."

"You think you'll—?"

"I don't think I'll recover. I *know* I shan't. I feel as if the pain had gathered in the only part of my body that was still sound and could resist it. And since my illness has undermined that last corner in my body, that's the end and it will come very soon."

Maarja changed the subject.

The sick man, too, became more talkative. And the longer his searching eyes lingered on the young woman's fair face, the softer his voice became and the more tender the words he spoke. His whole appearance expressed a strangely submissive melancholy. He spoke about the future of his wife and child after his death, gave instructions and advice, voiced wishes and requests. He did not make the slightest allusion to Mait or whatever might have any bearing on Maarja's second marriage. He explained that she and the child were his sole heirs according both to his last will and to the law, and that in his will, which he had made while Maarja was in town, he had designated the minister as their guardian. His voice was soft and warm, as if he felt thoroughly gratified because he had atoned for his sin by doing something that was right and good.

The nearer nightfall drew, the more obvious it became that Anderson was correct in his appraisal of his condition. The fits of pain were growing in frequency and violence, and he said he could feel his strength ebbing away at an amazing rate. He breathed in gasps,

and once again high fever seemed to have set his blood seething. His speech was becoming incoherent, and his eyes were sinking almost visibly.

Maarja hurried to the kitchen. Perhaps she wanted to send for the doctor or could not bear to watch her husband's agony. In the kitchen she saw a fisherman from the village, who had come to inquire after the skipper's health. Among other things he told her that Mait had come home the day before.

The news sent her staggering back to the door, against which she leaned as if overcome with sudden giddiness.

"Oh," she muttered.

"I suppose he too would like to know how the captain's doing," said the fisherman.

"You may tell him that there's no hope that he'll live—none at all," she replied, and hurried from the kitchen. She did not send for the doctor nor tell Leena that the skipper was complaining of increased pain.

She wandered restlessly from room to room. Mait was back! The news seemed to have roused her. She walked back and forth through the skipper's three rooms, stopping occasionally or dropping into a chair for a brief moment. Finally she tiptoed to the door of the sick-room and held her breath as she put her ear to the keyhole. She heard painful groans. She ran off, but returned after a moment to listen. This time she fancied suddenly that Anderson was calling her. There he was again, and again. But she did not go in. Nor did she send Leena. She merely continued to listen. The bed creaked as if the sick man were getting up. She walked in.

Anderson sat on the edge of his bed, barely keeping himself upright. On seeing Maarja he sank feebly back.

"Why do you leave me? I'm glad you've come at last. I—I feel a very great pain. I'd like to—to rest a

little bit. Give me my sleeping-draught. You know where it is in the dresser. Please do me this favour, Maarja, I hope I'll get some relief from this racking pain."

"Just a moment, Paul."

"Don't give me too little—make it a bit more than I take every evening. And don't tell the doctor. Doctors insist on prescribing every single medicine with their own hand."

"I understand."

She crossed to the big dark dresser with the numerous drawers and shelves and opened one of the central drawers, which was full of bottles, glasses and paper-bags. She knew only too well the envelope-like bags in which the skipper kept his sleeping-drug—she had so many times dissolved that drug for him in water in the evening.

The young bride's hand holding the glass shook, and her other hand, reaching for the bag with the drug, shook even more violently. Thousands of thoughts flashed through her mind. Her blood was in a turmoil, and she felt as if her heartbeat carried as far as the sick-bed. Everything turned yellow in her eyes, then blood-red, then coal-black, and in that pitch darkness she thought she saw fiery tongues and nails and hooks glowing and whirling in a veritable hell-dance.

"Since he must die anyway, and will die—he himself and everybody else know he will— But suppose he doesn't? Anything may happen, some people die hard, and the doctor wouldn't have stayed away for so long if he'd feared that his patient might die— If not—when I'm so near my goal, when my happiness is round the corner— Live by his side? No, no—not for all that he's got! All that he's got will be mine anyway, and I'll be free and happy— God knows he'll die anyway—an hour, a day, a week, a month sooner or later. What difference

does it make to him whether it's tonight or tomorrow, on Trinity Sunday or St. John's Eve? I'm going to try—I know nothing, I'm guiltless, I'm just doing what he wants, what he's told me to do—"

She poured the white powder into the glass, but her left hand shook so violently that the glass fell and smashed into bits.

"What are you doing there, Maarja?" Anderson gasped from his bed.

"I'm mixing your sleeping-draught for you," she replied in a clear voice.

She took another glass from the dresser and poured into it some water from the jug that stood on the table and powder from the white paper-bags. When she drew near the sick-bed both her hands and her voice were steady.

"I hope you'll get some rest now."

"Did you pour in a bit more than usual?" Anderson asked, eagerly putting his hot lips to the glass.

"I did as you told me."

Immediately after that Maarja ran to the kitchen.

"Come and keep me company, Leena! See if we should send for the doctor. He's feeling worse again."

When they entered the sick-room Mrs. Anderson asked her husband in a faint, tender voice:

"Shall we fetch the doctor from the estate, Paul dear? Your pain's getting worse and it scares me terribly."

"No," he replied in a calm but very feeble voice. "I feel the pain lessening, I think I'll sleep soon."

"What do you say, Leena?" Maarja whispered. "He says the pain's lessening, but shouldn't we send for the doctor just the same?"

"I really don't know," Leena answered sleepily, opening her mouth in a yawn. "The doctor said he'd come back tonight, didn't he? And since the pain's lessening and he's going to sleep—"

"I think so too," Maarja whispered. "If something happens we can send for him at once. But let's stay by his side."

They did. Anderson had fallen asleep. It was a sound sleep that lasted all night. At daybreak Maarja walked out of the sick-room, leaving Leena to watch on—she said she was dead tired and, besides, he was sleeping so sweetly. Leena was dozing hunched on the sofa when the doctor stepped in; it was about five o'clock.

He had had to stay with the child who was very ill, and since no one came from the skipper to fetch him—the estate was a mere three versts away—he had thought that after overcoming the crisis Mr. Anderson must still be doing well.

He stepped up to the sleeper, listened with a surprised look, took the skipper's wrist and let it go almost at once.

"When did he die? Why wasn't I called in?" he asked quickly.

Leena stopped rubbing her sleepy eyes and dropped her hands in dismay.

"Die? Is the master dead?"

"So you don't even know? Why, weren't you here?"

"I was here all the time, and the mistress too. At first—it must've been about—about eleven o'clock—he felt a great pain and it looked as if he was getting to feel worse, but then he said the pain had lessened and said he wanted to get some sleep."

The doctor shook his head and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then, carefully, he examined the dead body once more. A fainting fit or any other temporary

inhibition of vital activity was out of the question, for *rigor mortis* had already set in.

Meanwhile Mrs. Anderson slipped into the room. With a frightened face Leena whispered in her ear the news of the death. Maarja moved her lips as if about to give a shriek, but apparently feeling that it might not come off she hurried to the bed affecting mute pain, and there sank on her knees.

The news of the skipper's death had spread through the village, but still Mait did not show up. Being a good acquaintance and fellow-seaman of Anderson's, he ought to have considered it his duty to pay him the last call. He ought to have been the first to come. But he did not come even with the last visitors of the day. They were rather numerous, but it was in vain that Maarja waited for Mait.

The day passed, the evening wore away, and the terrible night, which filled Maarja with superstitious terror, crept into the house. The dead man, washed, lay on a clean bed, the candles were burning solemnly and mysteriously, and the silence brooding in the room was so ominous, the heat so stifling and the strange odour so sickening, that the young widow felt her blood freezing in her veins. She felt as if her soul longed to rest from the torture and shock through which she had gone the night before. Having to keep watch in such a condition over a corpse! Still she did it. She did not want Leena or the day-labourer, who kept her company, to think or speak ill of her. But she could only bear it till midnight. Then she began to shiver violently, her eyes went dry with fever, her lips burned and her cheeks alternately became blazing-red or waxy-yellow.

"What's the matter with you, Mrs. Anderson, what's the matter?" cried Mats, noticing it.

"I'm feeling awful," she moaned. "I want to get into bed—let Leena come with me because I can't—I can't—" Her speech trailed as she struggled to her feet.

Leena led her to bed and lay down beside her without undressing. Mats was left to watch over the skipper's body all alone.

Maarja's fever lasted till morning. Then she slept for a brief spell. During the day she felt better and diligently did her duties. But in the evening, or rather towards nightfall, the previous night's illness, caused by fear, attacked her afresh. That night she was delirious and in the morning she felt so enervated as if she had been ill for several weeks.

Mait had not come the day before, either, when the body had been confined. Perhaps he would come today, which was the last day the body would be in the house. On the following day it was to be taken to the chapel and the day after, which was a Sunday, the funeral was to take place.

The young widow waited for Mait till the afternoon, and then the suspense became more than she could bear and her patience gave out. She put on her newest and finest clothes, combed her hair and prinked herself before the looking-glass for a long time, and set out for the village.

On her way through the pine wood and alder grove, where nobody could see her, she rubbed her cheeks with her finger-tips to lend them colour, and on reaching the pond on the edge of the village she paused to look into the water to see whether her hair and kerchief were still trim. Then she hurried on with firm step, her face resolutely set, towards old Nākisaar's little house. Walking in through the gate she saw Mait's tall figure standing in the garden by the house. She went into the garden and a moment later stopped in front of the young man, her face flushed. He was alone.

Neither said good-afternoon.

With both hands Mait gripped the rake he had been using, and holding it in front of him, looked at Maarja with a peculiarly sullen expression.

"So you're back," she faltered.

"Yes, I'm back."

"And you don't come to see us?"

"Why should I come?"

"What do you mean, Mait?"

"Why should I come?" he repeated. "I'll go to church on Sunday and take a last look at the captain."

Maarja's eyes wandered from his cold face to his hands holding the rake, and, widening with amazement, fixed on a finger of his left hand. She stared, stepped nearer, stared again, and no amount of rubbing would have been able to restore to her face its former bloom.

"What ring is that?" she asked almost in a shriek.

"It's an engagement ring."

"You're engaged?"

"Since last week."

She trembled in her new fine dress, as if she were standing in a snow-drift.

"What about your pledge? Aren't you going to keep your word?"

"Did you keep yours?"

She gave him a glance as swift as lightning—it was plain that he knew about her marriage.

"But I'm already a widow!" she cried out.

"Are you?" he said, and there was something in his face that terrified her. "So you knew for sure that you were going to be a widow, eh? And you also knew *when* you'd become a widow?"

"I saw he was dying," she said calmly, even though her heart was pounding. "Otherwise I wouldn't have

become his wife. I also knew that you wanted your wife to have a lot of money, and that way I got it."

"I think you broke your word earlier than that," he remarked, smiling stiffly. "It was before your famous Finnish trip that took you only as far as a Tallinn mid-wife's—"

"Mait!" the young woman screamed, hiding her face in her hands.

"Did you really imagine people were all blind or fools?" he went on, keeping up his hostile smile. "But why talk about it any longer? I'm not your judge. All I wanted was to make it clear that it was you who'd broken your word more than once and not me."

"So you're going to get married—you're going to throw me over?" she said, so pitifully that it could have moved a stone. But it left Mait cold.

"Yes, I'm going to get married," he said simply.

"Mait," she said in a half-whisper, "I've now got much more money and things than you can imagine—"

"My future wife hasn't got more than five hundred rubles, but it's money that she's come by *honestly*, see? I think I'll be happier with her than with you—I hope you see that too!"

He flung the rake into a shrub and walked past her towards the gate and into the hut, closing the low door behind him.

It was the third night in the skipper's house. The deceased had had few friends, and there were now no more people left who could watch over him. Leinberg, the estate manager, paid a visit, but he only stayed till midnight. Then Leena and the mistress of the house were left by themselves again, Mats having gone back to his wife and children.

Leena was so worn out by her night vigils that now she did nothing but doze and sleep, and sleep and doze.

The young widow was practically all alone. This terrible word had a deep meaning for her, especially in her present mental state. She felt as if at any moment she might give a blood-curdling shriek and drop dead.

She was spurned, mocked at and condemned by the man for whose sake she had done it all!

"I don't need you! I can get dozens of husbands who're better than you! With my money I can buy myself a man of gold!"

This was what she had wanted to shout after Mait, but her voice had failed her. She was now repeating those words to herself at home, trying to assure herself that that was how she felt, that she had a right to shout those words and that she was through with Mait. She tried to tell herself at great length how nice life was, how happy wealth made people, how many joys and pleasures she could have with money. And those pictures reassured her for a moment. But no more than for a moment. Then came terrifying thoughts about the dead man, her brain was racked by nightmarish hallucinations, and she saw sinister visions.

"Rest, rest," she whispered, pressing her temples and rushing from room to room, all the rooms being lighted according to her wishes. "If only I could sleep a little. Then everything would be all right and I could live and enjoy my fortune. I want to forget everything—everything—just let this terrible night pass!"

She reflected. An idea occurred to her. She all but ran into the skipper's bedroom—the coffin stood in the drawing-room—and opened the big oakwood dresser from which she had got the sleeping-drug for her husband before his death. She poured into a glass of water about as much of the white powder as she had usually given to the skipper every night. She stirred the water with a spoon and drank the draught.

"Leena, I can't stay up any longer, I'm going to sleep a couple of hours."

Sleepily Leena mumbled something in reply.

"I need rest—and then I'll live a happy, merry life!" thought Maarja as she got into bed. She pulled the blanket over her full white bosom and her white, well-rounded neck, up to her fresh face that was now so pallid, and folded her plump arms under her head; her thick fair hair, which she had let loose, flowed about the pillow like strands of silk.

That was how she looked in the morning, when they found her in bed.

They tried to wake her up but could not. They tried to bring her back to life but failed. And yet she had gone to bed with the firm intention to *live*—to live well and long. She had sought rest, but not that kind of rest—not eternal repose. It must have come from the skipper's sleeping-draught, to which her blood was unaccustomed.

But perhaps what she had really needed was just such a long and complete rest?

THIRTY YEARS OF WEDDED LOVE

The young minister knew that the important thing was not the essence, not the kernel, but the shell. People often neither grasped, nor cared to grasp, the essence, and ninety per cent of his listeners let it in at one ear and out at the other. But what they really enjoyed, what made them open their mouths, and brought tears to their eyes and warmed up their hearts, was appearances, it was the preacher's voice, diction, gestures and temperament. Once he had these qualities in good proportion, even a protestant minister, that diluter of

the wine of religion, could move the greatest zealot of the old faith to ecstasy. Father Tuvi knew this by experience; and when talking with his colleagues he used to assert that you could achieve the same result even if you were to preach to an Estonian congregation in the Kirghiz language.

The young minister was well aware of the importance of a sonorous voice, facial expression and effective diction; he therefore did his best to train and rehearse accordingly whenever he had an opportunity, even outside the church—at a house wedding, a christening or a funeral. And when he saw that he was making progress, in fact rapid progress, he fell in love with himself; every exercise in oratory or prayer became for him an object of rhetorical enjoyment, and he relished his own skill as he might dainty food. That was why he delivered his funeral speech for Mrs. Kreek twice—first he had done it in the house of the deceased, and now he was doing it again in the graveyard. Everyone had expected him to say just a few more words over the grave since in the house he had said everything, absolutely everything, and very beautifully too; but he simply could not stop.

There was no harm in that, of course. It was summer, the day was fine, and that meant all the more honour to the deceased and the mourners. Both of Mrs. Kreek's daughters were weeping diligently, deeply moved by the minister's masterly speech; the others, while displaying less emotion, were following the sparkling flow of words with keen interest. Young Kreek, a budding lawyer who had become Russianized at school under the tsar, was using the opportunity to learn good Estonian from Father Tuvi as far as the sadness befitting a mourner would allow him. Only the widowed old Kreek, who longed to smoke a pipe, wondered why the minister must spin it out so long, why he couldn't cut it

short since he wouldn't get money for it anyway. But it could not be helped, and as Mr. Kreek's thoughts drifted off to other matters, even that feeble opposition to Father Tuvi's volubility died down.

Mr. Kreek's other thoughts could not be particularly cheering, for, besides the longing for a smoke, he was tortured by his black frock-coat. Think of having to sweat in such a crazy costume in that heat! He felt as if his sleeves were dripping water and his collar were sending up dense steam. It was a condition in which every fact and every recollection tended to irritate him still more. Take that coffin down there for one thing. Why did it have to be so expensive? You buried a lot of money in the earth for no reason at all, just to give people a chance to see the handiwork for a couple of hours. He'd never have bought such a coffin, but there were the children. They said it was their own dear mother and so they must bury her with all the honours and pomp she was entitled to. And nobody stopped to think that that pomp was worth two good milch cows.

Their dear mother! She had been good to *them* all right, so good as to almost ruin them. The girls smoked and drank, and spent their time in cafés and restaurants, dancing the Charleston or something. The house was always full of young men, with not a single prospective husband among them. What was more, you had to maintain the boy, as if he had no job of his own, and redeem his promissory notes, often signed at a card-table.

Yes, she'd been a very weak mother. And now, at the busiest time of summer, she'd up and died, and he must arrange a funeral and invite an awful lot of people and dine and wine them. But where was he to get the money? Everything had to be of the very best quality, too, because that was what the children wanted. Delicacies and foreign wines and liqueurs. A regular banquet. The

money it cost would have been enough to buy another two or three excellent cows.

And what about work? Because those painted and powdered and marcelled misses couldn't do a thing. Their mollycoddling mother had steered them clear of all that smacked of work. All he could do now was to look for a—for a second wife.... God, why must that windbag of a preacher chew the cud so long, talking about "thirty years of love"? It made you sick to hear him say it over and over again....

Indeed, as he delivered his funeral oration Father Tuvi kept varying the theme of the thirty years of married life and joint effort of the Kreek couple, a life full of the sunshine of true love. And he did it with such inspiration and ardour that not a heart could doubt any longer and not an eye remained dry. The weeping had become general, regardless of whether the weeper was a Lutheran or Protestant. And since the contents of the speech are not so important as its form, the minister went on for a long time repeating the refrain—"thirty years of love."

Meanwhile the worried widower, Mr. Kreek, had picked up the broken thread of his thoughts about a new wife, whom he must start looking for as soon as the funeral was over and done with. He had numerous acquaintances both in town and in the vicinity, where he owned a large farmstead—from the graveyard you could see its structures just as well as the towers of the town—and among those acquaintances there was many an unmarried woman. He began to pass them in show in his mind's eye, stopping to examine some of them closely, and discarding others at once.

Suddenly this rather entertaining occupation of his was interrupted. Something else, something external, claimed his attention. His eye chanced to turn to the south-eastern sky, and instantly his mouth dropped

open with fright, while his eyebrows jerked up. And as he was standing close by the speaker, he turned up his face and muttered, "Make it a bit shorter, please."

But Father Tuvi either did not hear or did not understand, for he took no notice of Mr. Kreek and continued his speech as fervently as ever.

Mr. Kreek was staring uneasily at the sky. The danger which he had detected was growing visibly. He waited awhile, and then tugged at the minister's talar as he muttered, more insistently than before, "Make it a bit shorter, please!"

Possibly this time Father Tuvi heard and understood, but try and tell a gurgling stream to stop and be quiet. So a few minutes later Mr. Kreek was compelled to pull at the minister's talar again and repeat his admonition more loudly.

This time he achieved a certain degree of success. The speaker slightly turned his head and gave the heckler a hardly perceptible pecking nod. And indeed, to Mr. Kreek's relief, his speech began at last to draw to a close.

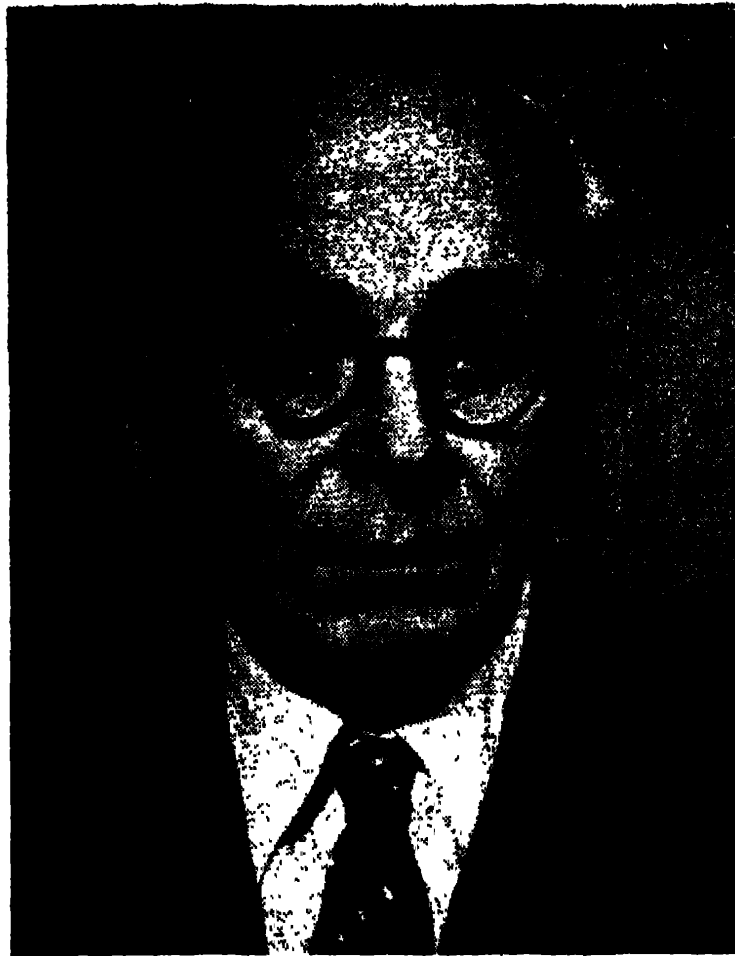
Then the last prayers were said.

Then the minister and the mourners threw their handfuls of earth.

The rustling was suddenly broken by the sharp, excited voice of Mr. Kreek, who shouted to the grave-diggers, "Come on, lads, fill up the grave, quick! I've got a good thirty hayricks out in the field, and now look at that rain-storm coming!"

And he hurried to the gate.

Translated by S. Apresyan



OSTAP VISHNYA

During my stay in Lvov in 1944, after it was liberated from the Nazis, I was told that the Ukrainian-German newspapers, published by the invaders in the city, had kicked up a racket, claiming that the Bolsheviks had tortured me, Ostap Vishnya, to death. Well, here's what really happened.

They tortured him terribly, particularly the dark one with the whitish eyes. He had a dagger made of the purest tempered national question and as sharp as they come.

"I'm a goner now," said Ostap to himself.

The dark one looked at him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Ostap."

"A Ukrainian, are you?"

"Yes."

Down came the hilt as the dark one jabbed it into the most sacred recess of Ostap's national ego. He gave an *ouch* and his soul started to twitter, making ready to escape. The dark one pinned Ostap's soul and began questioning him.

"Confess," he says, "that you wanted to put blue trousers* on the whole of Great Russia."

"I confess," says Ostap.

"Confess," says the other, "that you've been telling everybody that Pushkin isn't Pushkin but Taras Shevchenko."***

"So I have," says Ostap.

"Who wrote *Eugene Onegin*?"

"Shevchenko," says Ostap.

"He did, did he? And what did Pushkin write? Speak up!"

"There was no Pushkin at all, and there won't be any. Once it did look as if something of the sort had sprouted, but then they saw it was a woman—she's called *The Captain's Daughter*."****

* An allusion to the uniform used by the Ukrainian nationalists in 1918.—*Tr.*

** Ukrainian classic poet.—*Tr.*

*** A novel by Pushkin.—*Tr.*

MY LIFE STORY

I no longer have the slightest doubt that I was born. But Mother used to tell me I'd been found among the cabbages in our kitchen-garden. On the other hand, my aunt claimed that a stork on its way to our house had dropped me from its beak into our calves' crib, where I was later found. My grandmother, however, insisted that they'd pulled me out of the well as they were watering Oryshka, the cow.

I asked Father to tell me where I came from.

"You'll learn it when you grow up," he told me. "Now run along, let me work."

I was born on November 14, 1889, in the village of Hruni, Zinkiv District, Poltava Gubernia. To be exact, the event didn't take place in Hruni proper but on the near-by Chechva estate, where my father worked as a farmhand.

The conditions were most suitable for my development. There was my cradle rocking and rocking, and bending over me was my mother. I'd suck a bit, then sleep a bit, and that helped me grow. And so it went on: I ate and grew, and as I grew I ate.

My parents were like any other parents. My father's father—my grandfather—had been a shoemaker in Lebedyn and my mother's father—also my grandfather—a farmer in Hruni.

All in all my parents were very good people. To make it more fun for me to grow up they got me seventeen brothers and sisters.

As I grew bigger I ate bread and *borshch* and porridge and baked potatoes and green wildings, and bird-cherries that turned my tongue into a file, and ordinary cherries that painted my belly red, and elderberries that painted my face and tongue and head and hands and shirt as blue as a chicken gizzard.

"He'll be a writer," Father said one day as he saw me sitting on the floor, drawing lines from a pool with my finger.

Father's prophecy has come true, as you see. I *am* a writer, even though my skill is far below Gogol's. But it took Father's prediction quite some time to materialize.

A writer doesn't live and grow like an ordinary man.

After all, what's an ordinary man? He lives and lives, and then he dies and there's nothing more to be said about him.

Not so a writer. In the case of a writer you must state without fail what influenced his world outlook, what was his environment, what shaped him as he lay in his mother's lap and smacked his lips without bothering to think that some day he'd have to write the story of his life.

And now I'm expected to recall what led me to become a writer, what scheming devil made me rush headlong into literature, when was it that I began wondering what becomes of the hole when you've eaten up a *bublik*.*

You see, writers don't just crop up.

When I dig into my past I come to the conclusion that a future writer's life is actually attended by extraordinary phenomena and that but for those phenom-

* Ring-shaped roll.—*Tr.*

ena one would become an efficient doctor, engineer, mechanic, milkmaid or cooperative worker and not a writer.

Once those phenomena are there you're bound to take the pen.

A writer is moulded primarily by his natural surroundings, which in the case of a Ukrainian writer include moonlit nights, potatoes, hemp and tall weeds. If a child is given to musing and there are potatoes or tall weeds or hemp growing all around, he's bound to become a writer.

It was the same with me. There was a potato field close to the house and a patch of hemp. I'd sit there and the wind would blow and the sun would glow, and the potato would set me thinking about poetry and the universe at large. And I'd think and think until Mother shouted, "Go and see where that boy is, Melashka! Maybe he's dozed off. Mind you don't scare him!"

That was how it began. I'd sit there thinking, digging a hole in front of me because something drew me into the depths.

"I'd like to know who keeps digging that potato field," Mother would grumble. "Wait till I lay my hands on him!"

Then something else would urge me upwards and I'd climb on to the barn to shoo sparrows or on to a willow to catch young jackdaws.

I was a very high-strung and impressionable child—no sooner would Father pick up a strap or the whip than I'd whisk under the bed and start shaking.

"I'll show you how to climb on to the barn! I'll show you how to catch jackdaws! If it only killed you, but it might cripple you for life, you brat!"

I'd lie shaking under the bed, sniffing and thinking sadly, "Oh, God! The things a body has to go through on account of literature!"

One day I fell from a horse. It was a bad fall. I was galloping across the fields when a dog flew at me from behind a gravestone. The horse shied and down I went with a crash. I lay sprawled for an hour or so until I came to. Afterwards I was ill for about three weeks. And it dawned on me that I had a mission to fulfil since my life had been spared me at a fatal moment like that. The idea stirred faintly in my mind that it might be literature I was needed for, as it actually was.

Thus, between nature and people, the early years of my golden childhood flitted by.

Then I was sent to a four-year school.

It was not an ordinary school but one run by the Ministry of Public Education. I had two teachers, both very good. One of them was Ivan Maximovich, a kind-hearted old man, as white as a house in spring.* The other was Maria Andreyevna, a little old woman, who was always cuddling in her shawl and coughing into her little yellow fist. She'd cough and look up and her eyes would beam on us children and enwrap us in their gaze as tenderly and fondly as if it were our own mother turning on us the mellow sunshine of her loving eyes. They taught me conscientiously, for they were human conscience incarnate. I liked them both; I even liked Ivan Maximovich's ruler, which sometimes cracked down on my ink-stained hands. It did so because such was the "system," but I only got it when I'd deserved it and never very hard.

Where is it now, the ruler that moulded my literary style? Would I have become a writer at all but for old Ivan Maximovich and the gentle Maria Andreyevna?

My class consciousness began to take shape in the same period. I already knew the difference between

* In the Ukraine houses are whitewashed every spring.—*Tr.*

those who were landowners and masters and those who weren't. Father often sent me on some errand to the lady's drawing-room and said, "Kiss the lady's hand the moment you walk in."

She must be a big fish, I said to myself, since I'm told to kiss her hand.

True, my class consciousness was still rather vague. I'd kiss the lady's hand as if it were her due, but when she started shouting at me and stamping her foot I'd crawl under her veranda and hiss, "You just wait, you exploiting hag, when the October Revolution comes! I'll make you pay in full for those three hundred years of bleeding us ..." and so on.

I was sent to school before I was quite seven.

"You haven't studied enough yet," Father said four years later when I came home after finishing the school. "I'm going to take you to Zinkiv. It's a district town—you'll study there some more and then we'll see what you're good for."

I finished the Zinkiv school in 1903 and was issued a certificate making me eligible for the office of post-and-telegraph clerk of a very high class—somewhere near the fourteenth.* But it was a far cry to a clerk's office because I had just turned thirteen.

I went home.

"It didn't take you long to get through school, did it?" said Father. "What am I to do with you now? You're still so young. I'll have to give you some more education, I suppose, though I've got twelve children besides you."

Mother took me to the Army medical school in far-away Kiev, for as an ex-serviceman Father was entitled to send his children to that school "at the expense of the Treasury."

* The lowest grade in the pre-revolutionary Table of Ranks.—*Tr.*

In Kiev I opened my mouth wide with amazement the moment we pulled in at the station and didn't shut it until we'd crossed the whole breadth of the city to the Monastery, where we took up lodgings.

I finished the school and became an assistant doctor.

But I didn't give up my studies, and I studied and studied till I was able to enter the university. I was about thirty by then.

That was how ordinary people like me received an education in my day.

Today, under the Soviet system, young people are graduated from college at twenty-three and become full-fledged doctors, engineers, agronomists, teachers, collective-farm executives and so on.

I began writing in 1919, when I was on the wrong side of thirty, and I've kept it up ever since.

I suppose you'd like to know how to become a writer.

First of all, you must study hard. You must know your capitals and spelling and commas and everything else that makes for correct writing.

Second, you must read more than you write.

Third, you mustn't write like Pushkin or Shevchenko or Chekhov or Ivan Franko or Mayakovsky. You must learn from the classics and good authors, of course, but you must write in your own individual manner, so that your reader will say:

"Look, it's not Pushkin but Mushkin who wrote this, but it's quite readable just the same! Good for Mushkin!"

Fourth, Chekhov used to say that the important thing in a writer's work is not writing but crossing out what he's written. That's a very valuable piece of advice.

Fifth, a writer needs talent. But don't forget what Sholom Aleikhem, a wonderful Jewish humorist of rare

talent, had to say about it. "Talent is a queer thing," he said, "if you have it you have it and if you haven't you just don't." And the great Gorky said: "Talent is effort—it is work."

So let us study and work!

WILD DUCK SOUP

To Maxim Rylsky

There was a famous ornithologist named Menabir who, on the strength of many years of observations and research, finally established that wild duck are found, besides the market, on meadow lakes and in reeds, and also in the quiet backwaters of our emerald-green homeland.

And so you set out for those meadow lakes, reeds and quiet backwaters.

You naturally take along a fowling-piece—that's a shooting contraption—small shot and whatever else there is in the way of game-shooting outfit, without which you could never take proper aim. This includes a knapsack, a loaf of bread, tinned fish, cucumbers, tomatoes, a dozen hard-boiled eggs and a tumbler. As regards the tumbler you take it in case your punt starts to leak and you have to bail the water.

You go in a party, or rather a team of five men or so, because wild duck prefer to go into the pot as a product of collective endeavour.

The moment you've boarded your train or climbed into the car you'll hear someone sing out, "Damn it, I forgot that tumbler! Did you take one?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll borrow it from you if we get together. If not I'll have to swig it right from the bottle."

In game-shooting slang, the bottle is that part of the punt which in sea-going craft helps you down the hatch.

Wild duck like to be shot down in that quiet evening hour when the sun has already slipped beyond the scarlet horizon, flashed you its golden farewell and gone to sleep. In the morning, however, wild duck take off in search of your shot very early, as soon as it starts getting light. Those are the hours when you can hear the whir and swish of duck flying above and in front of and behind you, on your right and on your left. And you keep shooting this way and that way. Ah, those unforgettable moments!

You're late for the evening shooting—you must be.

Being late for the evening shooting is a law with fowlers. You know as you start from home—no, you know *the day before* you start—that you're bound to be late for the evening shooting. For that very reason, the day you've planned to start on your way, you get to packing first thing in the morning and forget to take this and that, and when the hour comes for you to leave you rush out of the house and race to the station or to the waiting car. If a friend stops you to ask where you're going you fling him a hurried reply, "I must hurry so as to be late for the evening shooting," and speed on at a gallop.

To cut a long story short, you're late. You reach your lake when the duck have already shut off their engines, brushed their teeth, done their evening exercises with a cold dip and gone to bed, pillowing their heads on the water-lilies.

But you don't let that upset you, for near each meadow lake there's a stack of straw or a rick of fragrant hay. You cross to the stack and make yourself at home. You dig into the hay, spread out your raincoat, lie down, gaze into the deep starlit sky, and relax. And while relaxing you think.

Well, you may think to your heart's content—we are going to make ready for the morning shooting.

"I say, let's get ready right away so we don't have to waste any time in the morning but grab our guns and take up our positions. Now where's that tumbler? I asked her to pack it, didn't I?"

"Can't you find it?"

"No."

"I have one. I've made it a rule to tie it to the inside of my knapsack every time I come back home. When you forget your gun it doesn't get on your nerves like when you forget the tumbler."

"I'll do the same from now on. But this once please lend me your tumbler. I must say that drinking from the bottle is a tricky thing. The air is so pure, you draw a deep breath before taking a swig, and before you know it in the darkness you're almost down to the bottom."

That's when the most interesting stage of duck-shooting begins—when your old, seasoned companions start relating all sorts of extraordinary incidents from their fowling past.

It's a feature common to all stories of that kind that they give nothing but facts, that the things they relate have actually happened, that "it may sound incredible but it's a fact."

Overhead some cosmic boy pitches stars, streaking golden trails in the dark-blue abyss; the Cart* rolls creaking on, its shaft pointing lower and lower; the Carters' Road** grows paler and paler, while a wonderful pattern of game-shooting yarns is woven at the foot of a haystack.

And the air is so sweet and so easy to breathe in.

* The Great Bear.—*Tr.*

** The Milky Way.—*Tr.*

Gradually the narrator's voice drops lower, trails in an increasingly erratic course, and finally dies down altogether.

Everybody's fallen asleep.

At the crack of dawn, when the sky has barely begun to turn grey, somebody nudges you in the ribs.

"Get up! Get up! It's time."

"Hhhh— Mmmm—"

"Get up!"

"Mmmm—"

Bang!

"Bombs!" you shriek as you jump up and rush away.

"Blast you! I only took a pop at a duck!"

"And missed!"

"Of course I did, with you fellows streaking for the bomb-shelter like a bunch of madmen. I almost fell into the lake!"

The morning shooting is on.

From now on all depends on your knowledge and skill.

The duck is a fowl, as you know. It can fly. Now how are you to go about shooting it?

Oh, it's simple enough: Be sure to aim at its eye, and fire away. Bang and bag. Bang and bag.

If, however, you're out of luck—that is, if you bang and bang and bag nothing—don't feel too bad about it; be sure to drive or walk past the market-place on your way home or, if you see a lucky chap hung with duck, say casually to him, "Duck must be 'teen rubles each now." For when you get home your people will ask you anyway, "How much are ducks on the market today?" But don't you mind that, just ignore it and start cooking an amber wild duck soup right away.

First of all you must pluck the fowl. The place best suited for it is your study. Open the windows and door so that the plucked feathers won't be in your way—each time you pluck a pinch of feathers the wind will snatch it up and blow it about. You'll have both the duck plucked and your study turned into a feather-bed.

When you've finished plucking you call to your mother or wife or sister, as the case may be, "Here you are! Now you can cook it."

Should your wife or your mother gasp and come back with "It isn't a duck, it's a chicken!" you must declare without flinching, "It's a duck! This is what duck are like nowadays. They're a new breed."

"But why is its throat cut?"

"Why? Must you know everything? It was on the wing when it saw I was taking aim, there was no getting away, so it cut its throat. What's so very unusual about that? Now come on, cook it, there's a dear!"

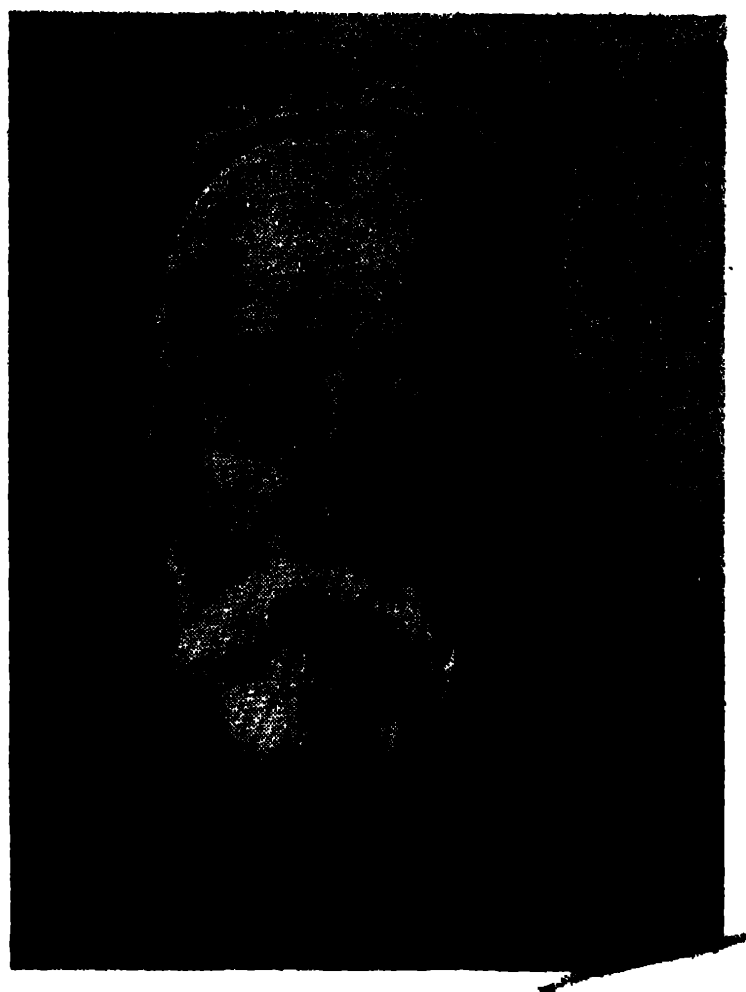
The next step is to eat the soup.

How are you to do it?

Do it with a spoon.

When you've had your fill, lie down on the couch and read *A Sportsman's Sketches* by Ivan Turgenev. It's a fascinating book.

Translated by S. Apresyan



SADRIDDIN AINI

Tajik

The work of Sadridin Aini
tations of Tajik realist prose, vivifies
Tajik people.

who laid the founda-
tes the history of the

When he was twelve Aini's irresistible thirst for knowledge brought him to Bukhara. There he had to divide his waking hours between memorizing religious dogmas, commenting on "learned" books at the madrasah, and washing the smocks of the rich for a living. But his nights he spent in poetical communion with the great classics Hafiz and Saadi, Kamal Khujandi and Ahmad Danish.

In 1917, to quote Aini, he "entered the school of the October Revolution as a pupil of forty."

Aini was the first in Tajikistan to write literary and critical works from a scientific angle. A tireless worker, he made it his first commandment not to let a day pass without writing at least a line.

Aini's vast literary work includes several novels and stories, of which the better known are the stories *The Orphan*, *Odina*, *The Hangmen of Bukhara* and *Death of a Usurer*, the novels *Dokhunda* and *Slaves*, and the trilogy *Recollections*.

The following is a fragment from *Bukhara*, which is the title of Book One of *Recollections*. It refers to the period when young Aini attended the Bukhara Madrasah.

MY LAST DAYS AT THE MADRASAH

I n 1891, soon after school began, Mullah Abdusalom, assistant instructor at the madrasah, gave a party for the reader of his group, Sharifjan Makhdum, and some of his school-fellows with whom he was on a familiar footing. I did the cooking and served the guests.

Mullah Abdusalom's cell was one of the best in the madrasah; unlike the other cells it was one-arched and rather roomy. As in most Bukhara madrasahs, the hearth and sink were beside the door, so that we were all close together and I was able to take part in the general conversation while cooking pilau or making tea.

Sharifjan Makhdum recognized me as soon as he came in with his friends.

"Isn't this the boy," he asked Abdusalom, "who beat that braggart Mirza Abdul Vohid in *baitbarak*?"*

"Yes, that's him," replied Abdusalom.

"He's done well to come here to study," said Sharifjan Makhdum.

I was delighted with the party, for the conversation turned chiefly on poetry and literature in general, most of the guests being either poets or connoisseurs of poetry. Those of them who did not know much about poetry were good story-tellers, and timed their stories very skil-

* A literary game in which each contestant tries to outdo his adversary by reciting a poem beginning with the final letter of the poem recited by the other.—*Tr.*

fully. The guests told witty anecdotes, competed in improvising distichs patterned on each other's style, recited quatrains by poets of the past or criticized their contemporaries' lame attempts to imitate the great. Sometimes those competitions and recitals turned into mutual derision or praise, or into a satire on the absent.

One of the guests was Mullah Nazrulla Lutfi, a bookbinder, who impressed me more than anyone else. Afterwards I learned that he had begun to study as a bookbinder's apprentice and had taken to literature. He was now about twenty-eight years old and was completing his studies at the madrasah. His ample knowledge was matched by his good looks: a ruddy complexion, a brown beard, big hazel eyes, arched eyebrows and long eyelashes. He was rather tall and slender, and had shapely hands and feet. He made the impression of a poem.

Lutfi was a calligrapher and he wrote so beautifully that even those who could not read admired his handwriting like a masterpiece of art. He earned his living by copying books.

Lutfi's poetry was ordinary in form and trite in content. But he was so genial, so eloquent and quick at repartee, that it was a pleasure to hear him talk. In conversation he often used ambiguous terms that sounded harmless but actually conveyed irony or praise. He also knew how to interpret what the others said in a way that had never occurred to them.

Another guest was Mullah Rahmat the barber. He had begun to ply that trade in his boyhood, and had carried it on even after entering the madrasah. In later years, while continuing his studies, he had made a living by writing business letters for wealthy merchants. He was about thirty years old and was a school-fellow of Lutfi and Sharifjan Makhdum. He had always been lukewarm to his studies, and as for literature it had

never interested him particularly. A soft-tempered man, he had none of the conceit of a mullah. He hated smug and conceited bigots, and used to say that pilau was his only spiritual preceptor.

Wherever he went in summer—whether in search of a livelihood or for pleasure—he invariably picked up interesting stories or passed through curious adventures, and on coming back entertained his friends and school-fellows with an amusing account of his experiences.

Sharifjan Makhdum said to him, "I see you've changed from clipping to quipping."

One of the company was Mullah Okil. He was an ignorant man who knew nothing about science or letters, and found no pleasure even in witticisms. His only virtue was his gentle and cheerful disposition. He never took offence at anything. His school-fellows could have as much fun as they liked at his expense—he would just smile and swallow it. The others attributed his gentleness and good humour to dull wits.

Another guest was Mullah Burhan of Kulab, a hulking man of about thirty. He had a chubby, swarthy face and wore an enormous black beard. His eyes never lost their bright glitter. He was an excellent story-teller, and he combined the brusqueness of a mountaineer with the mellifluous manner of a Bukharan.

Once he had signed his mediocre poetry with the pen-name *Mushtoki*.* But after Lutfi had purposely mispronounced it *Mushi Toki* ("mountain mouse") Burhan changed it to *Bismil* ("killed"), saying that Lutfi had "killed" him with his tongue.

Burhan had broken off his studies two years before to go to his native mountains, and had only come back to the madrasah a short while ago. But since in Bukhara

* "Yearning."—*Tr.*

lagging in one's studies was not regarded as falling behind one's school-fellows, he had been allowed to re-join his group.

Burhan told the following story to account for his two years' absence.

THE PILGRIMS' SHOES

One summer I made up my mind to withdraw to some secluded spot where I could go over past lessons and prepare for my future studies. Besides, it had to provide me with free food. They told me that the shrine of Khoja* Ubon was just the place I was looking for.

You know that the shrine of Khoja Ubon is in a sandy desert, five *farsakhs* or so to the north-west of Bukhara. The first half of the way runs across cultivated fields and the other half across a sandy tract, arid and barren. And though it was hard going I managed to reach the shrine.

There was no water or grass or trees or village near it. The only building was the shrine and in it the only other room besides the vault of Khoja Ubon was the *chillakhona*.** There was a deep well with brackish water that was only used to treat the ailing. Drinking-water had to be brought from a distant village in skins or jugs—on donkeys or on horseback.

Outside the shrine was a prayer chamber with a terrace and a refectory known as the "reception-room of the great saint."

To the north of the shrine was a large estate surrounded by high walls. It belonged to the guardian of the shrine.

* "Teacher"—used as a title of respect.—*Tr.*

** A cell to which believers retire for forty days to fast and pray --*Tr.*

He was a short, fat man of about seventy, with a red, round face and white beard. He also performed the duties of *imam*, mullah and preacher, and managed all the other affairs. He had in his service a few attendants called "sweepers."

Around the shrine rose mountain-like hills of red sand that reached Charjui on one side and Khorezm on another, and ran all the way to the Kyzyl-Kum Desert in the north.

Although the countryside was so barren, the refectory was always well stocked with delicious food. It was brought by pilgrims and ailing people, who were both devotees of the saint and disciples of the guardian.

I was told that, thanks to countless gifts and donations, the guardian's store-rooms burst with flour, wheat, rice and barley, his jugs brimmed with butter and his pastures teemed with horses and sheep. Moreover, the guardian had laid his hands on a good deal of land belonging to the neighbouring villages, and dozens of his disciples tilled it for him without pay.

When I first saw that abundance of food I thought I was in a paradise in the heart of hell. Afterwards I learned that not a pilgrim, not a wanderer or beggar, managed to stay more than three days in that "paradise." Though their eyes shone and their mouths watered at sight of the delicious food and though their hearts craved for it, they had to leave the place like Adam or the devil. They said it was because the saint did not want them to stay longer. The peasants who brought their offerings to the saint could not stay long, either, because they had to hurry back to their work. After handing in their gifts and receiving a few bottlefuls or jugfuls of "healing" water most of them left the shrine on the same day.

I decided to ignore the will of the saint and stay there for forty days. I put up in the *chillakhona*, and

three times a day I went to the refectory to eat the plentiful food in the company of disciples and pilgrims.

When I woke up at dawn on my third day I saw that my shoes had been placed in front of the threshold, ready to be put on. At first I took no notice of it, thinking that it was a sign of respect on the part of the attendant. But after the thing was repeated again and again I felt embarrassed.

"Look here, friend," I said to the attendant, "you're a man like myself and perhaps because you sweep this place you deserve greater honour and esteem than I do. So don't take care of my shoes any more, because you make me feel ashamed."

"But I didn't put out your shoes," he replied.

"Who did, then?" I asked in surprise.

"The saint."

"What saint?"

"The holy Khoja Ubon, who lies entombed in this shrine."

He said it so confidently as if he had actually seen the saint putting out my shoes.

His reply surprised me still more and I realized that there was some secret behind it. To find it out I asked the attendant very earnestly, "Why does the great saint put out my shoes? Is it a special favour he does to me?"

"No, he does it to show that he's displeased. When the holy Khoja Ubon wants somebody to know it's time he left this place he puts out that person's shoes."

"What if that person doesn't leave even then?"

"In that case he'll fall ill with leprosy."

His tone seemed to imply that he had on more than one occasion seen the disobedient taken ill with leprosy.

Now I knew the secret of the shoes. I knew why pilgrims, wanderers and beggars could never stay in that place for more than three days. I laughed in my sleeve

and said to myself, "I'm not a fool to let them trick me so easily into giving up the excellent fare I get here. I won't go till the guardian throws me out with the help of his attendants."

That same night, when all the gift-bearers and devotees were sound asleep on the terrace of the prayer chamber, in the reception-room and elsewhere, I put out their shoes and went back to the *chillakhona* to sleep.

At daybreak when I went out I saw all the guests and disciples and devotees making ready to leave. They looked hurt and dejected. They were probably thinking that since the saint did not wish them to stay, there was no telling what misfortunes might befall them now.

From then on I did it every night. As a result it was rumoured all over the countryside that Khoja Ubon did not want anybody around except the guardian, his attendants and me. The gift-bearers stopped visiting the shrine.

One day the guardian himself came into the *chillakhona*. His face was redder than ever and his eyes were bleared. I said to myself that he would now turn me out by force if I refused to go of my own accord. I rose as if to salute him. He signed to me to sit down again, and even forced me back into my seat. Then he sat cross-legged in front of me, as respectfully as a disciple would sit in front of his preceptor, and began to speak, bringing his face close to mine as if to tell me a secret. His breath smelled of wine, something which I had never imagined I could come upon in a holy place like that. I realized that the old man had sought strength in the home-made wine allowed by the Sharia. But I saw from his face that he had drunk the wine not to revive his strength but to pluck up courage for his interview with me.

"It seems that you were not awed by the great saint," he said.

"Of course not!" I snapped.

I was determined to disclose his secret to his attendants and disciples before leaving.

But he said, "In that case this place is not the shrine of a saint, it is your own home. Only, I beg you not to upset the saint's practice of putting out shoes. I also beg you not to reveal this secret, for it is said that 'secrets are best kept secret.'"

I saw that he preferred to come to terms with me.

"I owe you this for coming here," he said, putting in front of me a bundle he had taken from his pocket. "Before you go back to town you will also be supplied with a smock and a tunban by your well-wisher."

He hurried out. I unwrapped the bundle and found in it a hundred Bukhara *tangas*, that is, fifteen rubles.

From that day on I no longer had to go to the refectory. The best of the food was brought to the *chillakhona* for me. While the other guests were given plain home-made bread, I was served flat cakes from the finest white flour. A maid had been assigned to take care of my laundry. I was no longer a guest but a member of the guardian's family. All the servants and attendants showed me the greatest respect. In short, I had become a "wolf in the house."

Another story which Mullah Burhan told us may be entitled:

THE GIRL IN THE DESERT

"My mother died when I was eighteen," she told me. "I was my parents' only child. My mother could read and write and she also taught it to me. When I turned sixteen she thought it was time I was married. She watched for an eligible suitor throughout the last two years of her life. But nobody came. The fact is that my

father—the guardian of the shrine of Khoja Ubon—is a khoja himself, and khojas marry their daughters only to men of their own kin. As it happened, there was no young bachelor among our kinspeople, and so my poor mother died without seeing her wish come true.

“A year after Mother’s death Father took another wife.

“We had two maids. But my stepmother made me do all the hard and unpleasant housework. If she saw me reading a book after I’d finished my work she nagged me, saying that a girl who read books was bound to acquire loose morals, and she thought up some new job just to stop my reading. And at night I could hear her complaining to Father.

“‘Your daughter reads a lot of shameless poetry,’ she’d say. ‘Stop her, don’t let her read any more books, and give her away in marriage as soon as you can.’

“I, too, longed to be married as soon as possible, even if my husband should be seventy, so that I could get away from my hated stepmother. But there was no suitor, as if our kin had become extinct. Our kinsmen all married the daughters of disciples and devotees, who were brought to them in fulfilment of a vow, in the same way as cows or sheep are. Under these circumstances, how could an unfortunate girl like me, who lived in a desert, find a husband?

“Four years later my stepmother died of spotted fever. Five months after her death Father got married again. His third wife turned out to be worse than his second. She not only forbade Father to buy me new things but wouldn’t even let me wear my poor mother’s clothes.

“‘What a wife has left belongs to a wife and not to a daughter,’ she used to say.

“She stole things from our home and took them to her relatives. Father wouldn’t stand for it and he turned

her out of the house. Ever since then I've been the sole mistress of the house.

"I took Sitora into my service. She was nine years old at that time. She's an orphan and I love her like a sister. She's now my only trusted friend.

"There was in Bukhara a widower of fifty, who was a descendant of Khoja Ubon. He sent a *khostgor** to my father.

" 'I'm growing old,' I heard my father reply to the *khostgor*. 'I have no wife and she's my only child. My daughter takes care of the household and I shall only marry her to a man who's willing to live in my house.'

"The suitor had a house of his own and a business in town, and of course he didn't accept Father's terms. I realized that I was fated to live alone all my life, because no descendant of Khoja Ubon would ever agree to leave town and settle in the desert, in the house of a close-fisted and greedy father-in-law.

"I had never looked at a man, not only with love but even with curiosity. But one day there came a man who dared to rise against Uboni tradition. I was a victim of that family tradition and I came to like that courageous man even before I'd seen him. I began to watch him from behind the walls and doors of my home. I saw that he was a handsome young man, and my affection for him grew deeper. Finally it reached that stage which the poets call love and which makes them moan as from a snake-bite."

Stirred by the recollection, she heaved a deep sigh.

"I think there's love in every young heart," she went on. "For a while it stays still, like water blocked by a dam. But then it finds an outlet and starts flowing in that direction, first in a thin thread, then in a stream that goes on swelling until it becomes so powerful that

* Match-maker.—Tr.

nobody can check it any longer, and it sweeps all obstacles out of its way. My love is like that too."

She looked at me, as if waiting for a reply.

"And who is that lucky man?" I asked.

She kept looking at me.

"If you haven't guessed it from my behaviour or from what I've just told you, then I'll say it plainly: it's you!" she replied, flashing her teeth in a smile. "It was you who exposed the trick of the shoes and laughed at my father and trapped him. You made me hope that it would be possible to break certain Uboni customs. You brought me back to life and roused the hopes and desires of youth in my heart. And it was you before whom the passion of my youth made me bow my head in submission."

I didn't know what to do or say. I only knew that I was madly in love with her.

"I should like to live with you in open and lawful wedlock. But I won't tolerate anything underhand," she said.

"I'm willing with all my heart," I replied. "But how are we to persuade your hard-headed father?"

"There *is* a way," she said, "but it calls for a good deal of effort on your part."

"What is it?" I asked eagerly. I did not see it. "I'm ready to stake my head on it."

"If it's to cost you your head, what use is it to me?" she said, smiling. "I've heard that some of the khojas living in town, when they can't marry their daughters to men of their own kin, marry them to mullahs because they don't consider mullahs inferior to khojas. You must find someone who will persuade my father to do the same."

I tried to think where I could find a fox that could outwit the old wolf.

"Perhaps you don't want to live in this desert," she said, seeing my hesitation. "All you have to do is to pre-

tend you're accepting his conditions. After the wedding I'll be your slave according to the Sharia and you'll be free to live here or take me away. If you take me to Bukhara I'll be able to earn a bit by sewing or by teaching girls to read and write."

Much as I doubted my ability to persuade her father, I assured her that I would do so.

The moon had passed over our heads, and a minaret-like beam of light thrust skywards in the east.

"You've called the desires of my youth back to life," said the girl, getting up. "Once again I'm hoping for happiness. From now on my fate is in your hands. Remember."

*What more has fate in store for me?
Of the two which is mine.
Your hand holding me caressingly
Or killing my heart and mind?"*

I got up too and put my arms around her neck; she drew me to her, and our lips met. Dawn was already spreading its pale beams above us.

"Oh, we must part before we do anything really wrong," she said

She released me and hurried off.

I walked by a devious route back to the shrine and shut myself up in the *chillakhona*.

Next day the guardian came back from town. I was the first to call on him. I pretended to be happy to greet him and listen to him, but I did not stay with him long so as not to weary him.

From then on I used every opportunity to see him and ask him questions about his private life and his family. But the old fox answered my questions very briefly, without revealing his family affairs, and I had no chance to offer him advice. And so the days passed without my making any progress.

Sitora came often to give me regards from the girl and ask me on her behalf how I was getting along. But the old man did not go anywhere and I could not see the girl.

One day a sixty-year-old widower, a descendant of Khoja Bahauddin, sent in his *khostgor*, but the man carried back a refusal. I called on her father and making as if I knew nothing offered him my congratulations on the match. He replied that he had refused, and went on to tell me why.

"My family is descended from the great Othman, who was the Prophet's third friend. The Bahauddinis, however, usurped the title of khoja after the death of Baha-uddin Nakshband.* But nobody knows who were Baha-uddin's ancestors. I shouldn't be surprised if it turned out that he's a descendant of the pre-Islamic fire-worshippers of Bukhara. So how can the Bahauddinis be a match for us and how can we marry our daughters to them?"

"I understand your daughter is advanced in years," I said. "Under the Sharia it is the father's duty to give his daughter in marriage as soon as she comes of age."

"I didn't attend the madrasah for a long time, but I know the Sharia," he replied. "The Sharia allows for exceptions whenever necessary. One passage says that 'if need be it is permissible.' If I can find a worthy husband for my daughter I want him to live in my house. But it all depends on fate. The information you have about my daughter's age is inaccurate, because she's just over seventeen. True, under the Sharia girls may be married at the age of nine and that is a wise provision because it safeguards them from the eyes of strangers."

"Under the Sharia," I replied, "mullahs are equal to khojas in nobility. If no husband can be found among the khojas, a suitable mullah could be chosen."

* Founder of an order of Sufi dervishes in Bukhara (14th century).—*Tr.*

I paused to watch the effect of my last words. Unfortunately his face expressed resentment. Nevertheless, I continued, "Of course, you can't trust any mullah. The mullah who's to become your son-in-law should serve you like a slave. He should not own a house in town and should settle in your house for good. Moreover, he should keep the secrets of this holy place and help you perform miracles. You won't have any difficulty in finding a mullah who has these qualities. And surely you don't need a wealthy son-in-law, since your own wealth—may Allah multiply it!—is quite sufficient. A needy son-in-law endowed with these qualities would contribute to increasing your fortune."

This was as much as to offer myself as a son-in-law, since I fully met the conditions I had listed. The old fox, who saw what I was driving at, instantly covered up his resentment with a mask of joy. But my searching eyes saw through that mask.

"I wish I could meet such a mullah," he said cheerfully, pretending that he did not know whom I meant, "I would gladly pay all the expenses of a grand wedding. I wonder if you could help me by going to town, finding there a mullah who has the qualities you've described and inducing him to send to me an esteemed man of noble birth to solicit my daughter's hand for him."

He was trying not only to refuse me, but also to turn me out of his house. He apparently thought it risky to have a young man looking for a wife living near his over-ripe daughter who was eager for marriage. He had said that the *khostgor* had to be "an esteemed man of noble birth," because he knew very well that no such man would agree to plead for a poor devil like me.

That talk put me in a great predicament. I was expected to go to town as soon as possible in search of an eligible suitor. But how could I leave without letting the girl know what I was trying to do?

Finally the guardian left for the Jondor District to attend the wedding of a disciple of his. I did not budge from the *chillakhona*, waiting for Sitora. She came soon.

"My mistress sends you her regards," she said. "Her father's coming back tonight. My mistress wants you to go to the side-door as soon as it gets dark. She'll be waiting for you."

At last I was going to see my love again. My heart sang. But I knew that it was to be our last meeting. I could not bear to think of it. And I should have to lie to her, because if she found out that her father had refused me her health and her very life would be in danger.

Night fell early. It was as black as our future. I started slowly for the appointed place along the high outer wall of the estate.

As soon as I got to the side-door she came out to meet me. In her black satin dress she merged with the darkness. Her head was uncovered and her unplaited curly hair fell down to her knees in a black pall.

Before I could kiss her she took me by the wrists and drew me close to the wall. We stood pale and motionless, looking at each other.

"I heard what you said to Father," she said happily. "You put it very cleverly. I felt that he'd understood you and in his heart accepted you. But he couldn't bring himself to admit it and so wants you to send a *khostgor*. When are you leaving? When will you send a *khostgor*? Why are you still here? If you'd left immediately after your talk with Father your *khostgor* would by now have settled the matter for us. A good thing shouldn't be put off—delay leads astray, as the saying goes."

It was plain that she had believed what her father had said to me. I did not try to answer all her questions but simply told her why I had not left yet.

"I'd have liked to go at once," I said. "But I had to talk it over with you first, hadn't I?"

"Well," she said, "now you've talked it over with me and you have my consent. When are you leaving?"

"As soon as your father comes back I'll ask his permission and start."

"He'll be back any moment now. I've left Sitora on the look-out. She'll give a cough to let us know the moment he rides up to the gate. I have good news for you: Father had a new smock, a cap and a turban made for you. I think he wants to dress up his future son-in-law properly before sending him to a *khostgor*."

That outfit, which she had taken for a good sign, was no more than the price of my keeping the secret of the pilgrims' shoes. But I did not want to disappoint the girl, and thanked her for the "good news."

"Tomorrow morning I'll ask your father's permission to leave," I said. My eyes filled with tears; I tried to take away my hands and step aside. But she would not let me go and drew nearer still. We clung together. And then she saw that I was crying.

"Why are you crying?" she asked in surprise. "The time is past when we had to shed tears."

"I'm weeping because I must leave," I replied. "A distance of five *farsakhs* will lie between us."

"I should be the one to cry and not you," she said, "because separation is harder for me than for you. But I'm not losing heart because I'm hoping for a bright future. You're a man, so behave like a man."

As I could not stop crying she said in jest, "If you don't stop it I'll start crying too. Then I'll see if you can stand my tears."

She held me to her breast. The next moment we heard Sitora cough. My sweet love kissed me hurriedly and said as she let me go, "Good-bye, my love! Send your *khostgor* quickly and come back right after him."

She went in and closed the door behind her. All was over for me.

. Next morning I left for Bukhara.

Although I knew that the old dog would reject me anyway, I began to look for a *khostgor* as soon as I arrived in town. I had to send a *khostgor* if I did not want the girl to accuse me of treachery, all the more because the very idea of my having deceived her might kill her.

I did find a *khostgor*. He was a *khoja* of the Sheikh-rangrez family, who had married two of his sisters to mullahs because he could not marry them to *khojas*. I sent him because he answered the guardian's idea of "an esteemed man of noble birth."

Next day the *khostgor* came back, looking as weary and sad as an unsold cow trudging back from the market. It was not so much the long journey that had made him sad as the insulting manner in which the guardian had turned him from his door.

"I will never do such a foolish thing," the guardian had said, "and I'm sorry for you because, by offering yourself as a go-between in this matter, you've besmirched the title of *khoja*. I want a son-in-law who will have the whole countryside eating and drinking at his wedding for a week on end and thereby raise my prestige still higher."

The refusal did not surprise me—I had expected it. But I knew that the girl must have heard, listening behind her father's door, what he had said to my *khostgor*. The refusal, which shattered her hopes of happiness, must have driven her to the blackest despair. This thought preyed on my mind so painfully that I fell ill.

My illness lasted five months. As soon as I could go out again I got in touch with those *khojas* of the Uboni family who lived in Bukhara to find out how the unfortunate girl was doing. They told me that towards the end of the summer she had lost her reason and had hanged herself in her home.

The tragic end of the girl was a crushing blow to me, even though I had feared some disaster all along. True, this time I did not fall ill, but I felt like wandering through the streets bare-headed and barefoot, weeping like a madman. I had begun to lose my reason. Then I said to myself that the streets of Bukhara were too narrow for a madman. I went into my native mountains. There it took me a year to recover from my illness and another to regain my strength. And now here I am with you again, my friends.

We were deeply moved by Mullah Burhan's story. To cheer us up Mullah Rahmat the barber told us the story of a merchant who fell in love with a woman of Marghelan and whose steward made a fool of him, coming to the rendezvous disguised as a woman.

The party lasted till two o'clock in the morning. For the first time in Bukhara I had been listening to the refreshing conversation of people who were fond of literature. It was very different from the talk we usually heard at the madrasah. In comparison with those people Abdusalom and his table-companions seemed like corpses to me.

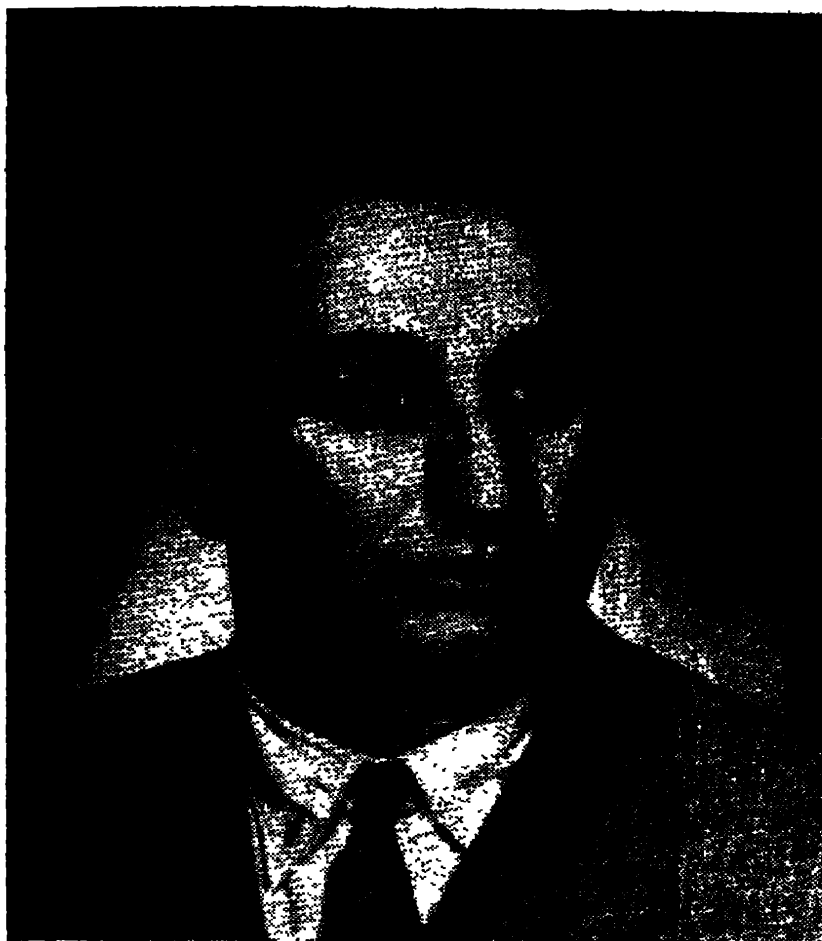
When the guests rose to go Sharifjan Makhdum said to my teacher Abdusalom as he pointed at me, "If that boy feels that there isn't room enough for him here at the madrasah you may bring him to our house. He'll serve us and carry on his studies."

"Good," replied Abdusalom.

Next day I moved to Sharifjan Makhdum's home.

My madrasah days were over.

Translated by S. Apresyan



GEORGY GULIA

Abkhazian Author

Georgy Gulia (b. 1917) is the son of Dimitry Gulia (b. 1874), Abkhazia's veteran writer and poet, linguist, historian and ethnographer, founder of the Abkhazian literary language and literature. The writer's profession seems hereditary in the Gulia family..

THEY MET AGAIN

They were expecting Professor Nanba and had a room reserved for him at the hotel. Alexei Tambia, chairman of the collective farm, met him at the station.

Nanba was a man of about thirty-five. His large horn-rimmed spectacles gave him a sullen look, but this impression was soon dispelled by his eager and friendly manner.

His hotel room overlooked the street, where silver poplars thrust up their slender cones and spreading mulberry-trees murmured gently in the crisp morning air. He threw open the window and listened with delight to the murmur, which seemed to stress the stillness that was so strange to him.

Gradually the freshness of the autumn morning gave way to the day's heat. The vapour rising from the earth condensed into bluish clouds in the distant gorges and crept up the slopes to meet the sun. Beyond the nearest mountain range snow-capped peaks glittered in the sun like swords. The morning was as clear as a drop of water hanging from the tip of an icicle.

"The mountains!" said Nanba, as if he had never seen them before. "Oh, the mountains!"

"Yes, they're quite up to the mark," Tambia agreed good-humouredly.

"And the mist!" Nanba went on enthusiastically. "It's been such a long time since I last saw it!"

It was by mere chance that Nanba found himself in his native Abkhazia. A month ago it would not have occurred to him that he would soon be admiring the familiar grey mountains, bluish mist and limpid sky. The memory of these parts had always stirred in him painful, conflicting emotions of love and deep dislike, and he had fought back the recollections. Being a persevering and judicious man, he could not indulge in sentiments to the detriment of his work. And subduing his excitement, he resumed his talk with Tambia.

"It's all true, the things you wrote, is it?"

"Yes, Professor."

"But that would mean that your lemon-tree can resist twelve degrees of frost!" cried Nanba. "Twelve degrees! Are you sure? Did you tell the agronomists? Let me see."

He checked himself and then spoke slowly, punctuating his speech as he did his lectures.

"So your lemon weathered the winter—"

"Two winters, Professor."

"Two winters—and the temperature was twelve degrees below zero, and the tree bore fruit, eh? Are you sure there's no mistake?"

Nanba was watching Tambia's face shrewdly, but Tambia answered his questions confidently, there was no doubting what he said.

"The climate is bad here," Tambia continued. "It was believed that we couldn't grow any lemons. Building shelters to protect the trees from the cold costs a lot of money. So we had a go at raising a frost-resisting variety, and it looks as if we've done it. Your research helped us a great deal, Professor. But we expect something more from you."

Tambia told Nanba about plans for the next year.

He said that the first experiments had come off well and the collective farm was going to plant frost-resisting lemons on an area of two hectares. The district authorities had promised to help.

Nanba asked detailed questions about the methods of grafting used. Much of what Tambia said was indisputable but some of it was not. And the professor was naturally expected to settle the doubtful points.

Two years ago Nanba had written a book demonstrating the feasibility of evolving frost-resisting lemons. He had lived those two years under a constant strain, fighting his numerous opponents one after another. I'm on the right track, he had kept telling himself, and the results have to be good. But the results were much too slow in coming. His method had been tried out on a few southern state farms without much success, possibly because minor details had been overlooked. He felt he must make a check on the spot, but he was loth to leave the town, preferring hothouses to the sunny expanses of the south.

And then the unexpected news had come. What had surprised Nanba above all else was the fact that it came from Abkhazia. The board of a collective farm asked his immediate help "in an important and complicated matter—exploiting the success achieved in evolving a frost-resisting lemon-tree," the letter said. It sounded too tempting to be declined.

It had not taken him long to start. But on the way and upon his arrival he had been assailed with doubts as to whether that tree actually existed. Could it be a trap? He had vague misgivings.

Meanwhile Tambia had finished his story and was waiting for further questions. Instead Nanba said musingly as he inhaled the fresh air with pleasure, "Fifteen years isn't a very long time but I feel as if I were here for the first time."

It was a shred of thought that Nanba had voiced and that he alone knew the meaning of. Even so he was annoyed to hear Tambia speak up again, that meaning having obviously been lost on him.

"I'm not surprised," said Tambia simply, rolling a cigarette. "I know it from my own experience. Not so long ago I went to town to take a three-month refresher course. When I came back I saw that something had changed at the farm. I asked people what was new. Some had built themselves new houses, others had bought new furniture, a day nursery had been opened 'Is that all?' I asked. 'That's all,' they told me. But I had a feeling that there was something they were keeping back from me, though I couldn't put my finger on it. One day I said so to our watchman. Do you know what he told me? 'It's the spirit that has changed,' he said. 'But don't waste your time looking for it in all sorts of papers, because the spirit is inside people!' Well, when I heard that I thought I'd put the old man straight so he wouldn't wind up with something like the Holy Spirit."

"I hope he beat you," Nanba interrupted.

"And how!" replied Tambia cheerfully. "My arguments drove him into such a temper that he started shouting. He snatched up a newspaper from the desk and poked it under my nose. 'Tell me in what book you've got it put down,' he says, 'that I've done away with my ignorance and deposit the gain right here in my head every day?' *That* was the spirit he meant."

"Did you give in?"

Tambia laughed.

"I didn't exactly give in but retreated in the face of the facts, so to say."

Nanba straightened up abruptly.

"You shouldn't have done it," he said earnestly. "Of course, a good deal has been done in fifteen years.

That's plain enough even to me, an arm-chair worker. Nevertheless, if we, or rather our spirit, had been changing as fast as that watchman of yours says it does, life would have shaped differently in many respects. Believe me it would."

Nanba had stressed the last words, as if hinting at something.

"I won't argue that point," Tambia went on, firm in his intention not to cede. "I've been thinking about it too. You're a learned man, you understand everything, and you can see further ahead. But I can only talk about the things that I see around me or that I've gone through. Let's take a simple example. It wasn't so long ago that we Abkhazians lived in darkness and ignorance, bowing our heads before our princes and nobles. It wasn't so long ago that for us the world ended at the yard fence. Every one of us lived all by himself, like a bear in its lair. You know that as well as I do. It wasn't so long ago, either, that we learned where to shop for knowledge, and now we have a scientist like you among us. After all, you too are a part of the new spirit, aren't you?"

"Don't let us talk about me," said Nanba in embarrassment. "Tell me instead when we start for the farm."

"The car'll be here at one o'clock."

"Fine. Now, if we are to talk about the new things at all, I'll say that we should first of all mention you, your farm, which has tackled a big scientific problem. And then—by the way, you didn't tell me who was in charge of the experiment. Is it the local agronomist or an outsider?"

"It's neither. He's an ordinary farmer, a team-leader of ours. We've nicknamed him the 'Lemon Man'—he's just crazy about lemon-trees."

"But who is he?" Nanba interrupted.

"Saluman Aran."

"Aran?"

"Yes—Gudym's son. You may know him."

"Aran, did you say? No, I don't know him, I don't," muttered Nanba, stepping back and putting his hand to his heart. It was thumping loudly, making his temples throb. **"I'm sorry,"** he explained, **"it's neurosis—and all that sort of thing. I'm a bit tired from the trip, I'll be all right when I've taken a rest. I'll find my way to the Executive Committee. I may be a little late, though."**

"I told you that you needed some sleep!" Tambia said reproachfully. He bowed, and walked out.

Nanba tried to sort out his thoughts, but his head felt as heavy as after a long fainting fit. Things were shaping so strangely.

Tall and stooping, he paced the room, his long arms behind his back. The floor-boards creaked. Time dragged on.

Nanba was wrestling with himself—with the shabby notions of his grandfathers that had been rammed into the innermost recesses of his soul like a charge of powder into a flint-lock. True, by now the powder was a little damp, but it could blow up yet, and Nanba knew it.

He tried hard to regain his calm. But the result was comparable to what happens to a piece of red-hot iron put in a small vessel of water: the water evaporates completely, while the iron only darkens a little.

A cold sweat stood out on Nanba's forehead; he kept walking up and down, up and down.

The day was getting warmer. The mountains continued to smoke dreamily, the light, gauzy clouds betraying the gorges hidden in the ranges. Nanba leaned his elbows on the window-sill, and plunged into recollections.

It was a blood feud, the traditional kind of irreparable strife whose origin nobody knew or remembered any longer. Two families had sworn to destroy, to wipe out, each other. It was an enmity handed down from great-grandfather to grandfather, from grandfather to father, from father to son, and on to the grandsons and great-grandsons. The Nanba family held it sacred. The Aran family, for its part, had sworn not to sheathe the sword as long as there was a Nanba among the living. And since long ago, like hungry wolves, people had been biding their time to fly at each other's throat.

Each of the two families had its own patron—a prince—and if it so happened that grief or weariness dulled hatred and the two families were ready to make peace the two princes, who throve on other people's sorrow, hastened to rekindle the dying flame. And then everything started all over again: bloodshed and tears and oaths. Once again every means—the cunning of a snake, the treachery of a jackal, the hatred of a man—was put to use.

More than once the gate of the Nanba yard had creaked long and mournfully, announcing the arrival of a dead man wrapped in a felt cloak. And more than once it had grimly banged shut behind a fresh coffin borne away to burial. The number of graves in the glade had been growing as fast as vine shoots.

The Aran yard, too, was soaked with tears and its soil as bitter as a salt-marsh. The Arans did not weep but groaned with deep, stifled groans. That was the only way they gave vent to their grief. Obstinate and inflexible, they were famed as terrible avengers.

One evening when the jackals were howling dismally and the sky was bright with stars Gudym Aran, Saluman's father, entered the Nanba yard. He had stolen in noiselessly, silencing the dogs with a chunk

of hominy. Old Kan Nanba sat by the fireside opposite his son, telling him an old legend.

"Good-evening," said Gudym, appearing suddenly in the doorway. "I've come to pay a debt."

He whipped out his pistol and fired. Kan made to say something but the words stuck in his throat, and he slumped forward into the fire. It had all come as swiftly as a stroke of lightning.

For four days the family wept over old Kan's body. For four days Alexander gazed at his dead father's face. Sometimes he fancied that his father was moving his lips, trying to speak, and then he would recall what the old man had said to him.

"My son, the sun rises from beyond the mountains and sets beyond the sea, a lump of snow sparkles in the sun and grows dim in the darkness of night, and man takes his revenge and dies. Remember my words."

And in the grey nights that were as full of moisture as upturned fallow after the rain, the father said to the son again and again:

"The smell of blood is powerful and the avenger scents it as a vulture scents carrion. And nothing can keep the blood in the veins. It has been so, and it will be so. Remember my words."

That was how the father had instructed the son in the immutable law of life, passing down experience accumulated over centuries full of evil and cruelty.

The effort it had taken Professor Nanba to renounce those words of his father, which had gone straight to his heart! His father came to him in his dreams, complaining that he was rotting unavenged, appealing vehemently to filial love, threatening and pleading. "The Arans are still walking the earth," whispered old Nanba's decayed lips.

Those dreams were torture.

In 1921 the habitual course of life was upset. Peo-

ple began to talk about the Bolsheviks and a new way of life—some hopefully and sympathetically, others with terror and hatred. Those days saw many a change. Even the moon seemed to shine down on the earth with a different light. That was when Alexander Nanba went to town to enter the first boarding-school to have been set up there. Like a captive wolf-cub yearning for the woods, Alexander kept thinking of his deserted home. He writhed at the thought that he might be taken for a coward. For he intended to go back. "It has been so, and it will be so," his father had told him, and he remembered those words.

Afterwards he went to a big city to continue his studies. There he got word that a Nanba had killed Gudym Aran. One day Gudym's horse had brought him home mounted in an unusual position—facing back. The old man, wrapped carefully in his felt cloak, was strapped to the saddle. No one would have believed that he was dead but for the frightful pallor of his face.

The years rolled on. At last Alexander became what his fellow-villagers called a big man, and settled down in the big city.

Professor Nanba was pacing the room, sunk in cheerless thought. He felt ill at ease. At that moment "big man" sounded like a mockery.

"How stupid of me to have come here!" he said to himself. "How rash! How could I have forgotten all that?"

He was not worried about himself, of course. It would have been ridiculous of a professor, an educated man, to see the vendetta as anything but a savage custom. But the trouble was that the other might still be clinging to the old ways, might in his ignorance try to take his revenge in keeping with the old custom. No

one could vouch that that kind of ignorance was over and done with. He must see to it that he did not meet the other. But how?

There was a knock at the door. It must be the clerk on duty.

"Come in!" Nanba shouted.

The door opened. A man in plain peasant clothes appeared on the threshold. He thrust his left shoulder slightly forward to get his powerful frame through the door.

"Excuse me, please," he said hurriedly. "I've come on business. If it had only concerned me I wouldn't have intruded on you. You see, I've brought some lemons."

The professor stood motionless. He knew that face and the cold glint of those steely eyes.

"My name is Saluman Aran," said the peasant, and held out his hand, smiling.

Nanba looked at the hand as if it were some queer object, and took it before he could quite realize what had happened. Mechanically he squeezed the hand, and felt its hard calluses. They had the effect of an electric charge.

"I know," he replied softly, and offered the visitor a chair. And suddenly he felt his face blazing with shame.

Translated by S. Apresyan